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PROJECT MORPHEUS
HOW SONY IS JOINING THE VIRTUAL REALITY REVOLUTION



THE MAKING OF SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD



CAN MICROSOFT TURN THINGS AROUND FOR **XBOX ONE?**

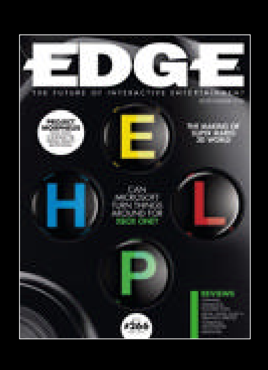




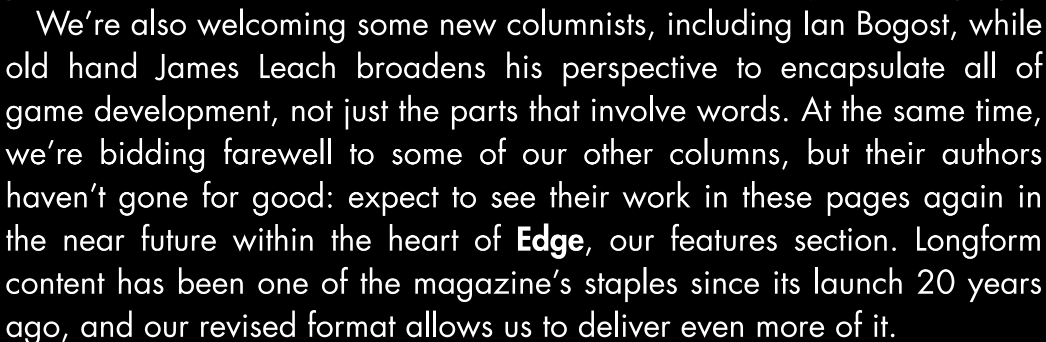
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MAY 2014

Time for a change – just ask the men driving Xbox One



Given that we're now ankle-deep into a new generation of videogame hardware, it feels like a good time to shake things up a bit. So we've revamped certain sections of the magazine, put others aside for the time being, and exhumed Time Extend, following many requests for its return (thank you for the polite ones). We've also chosen to no longer segregate some of our more development-focused content, because research tells us you're more interested than ever in the stories behind the games we play.



We're also welcoming some new columnists, including Ian Bogost, while old hand James Leach broadens his perspective to encapsulate all of game development, not just the parts that involve words. At the same time, we're bidding farewell to some of our other columns, but their authors haven't gone for good: expect to see their work in these pages again in the near future within the heart of **Edge**, our features section. Longform content has been one of the magazine's staples since its launch 20 years ago, and our revised format allows us to deliver even more of it.

In opening this issue's features section, we talk to leaders at Microsoft to discover how the company intends to turn its console division around and put it back into the number one spot. Xbox One has been dragged out of the pit in which it was dumped in 2013, but a rough battle lies ahead, and recent software sales help to illustrate the difficulties in store. Official UK data shows that PS4 accounted for 58 per cent of *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* units sold at the game's launch, with PS3 copies accounting for 15 per cent. That left a miserable 27 per cent shared across Xbox One and Xbox 360. When the game's developer, Kojima Productions, is so forthcoming about the comparative deficiencies of its Xbox One version, though, such numbers shouldn't be too shocking.



Clearly, Microsoft's console needs to continue evolving – and quickly. As we do the same, albeit at a slightly less urgent pace, we want you to get in touch via edge@futurenet.com to let us know how we're measuring up.

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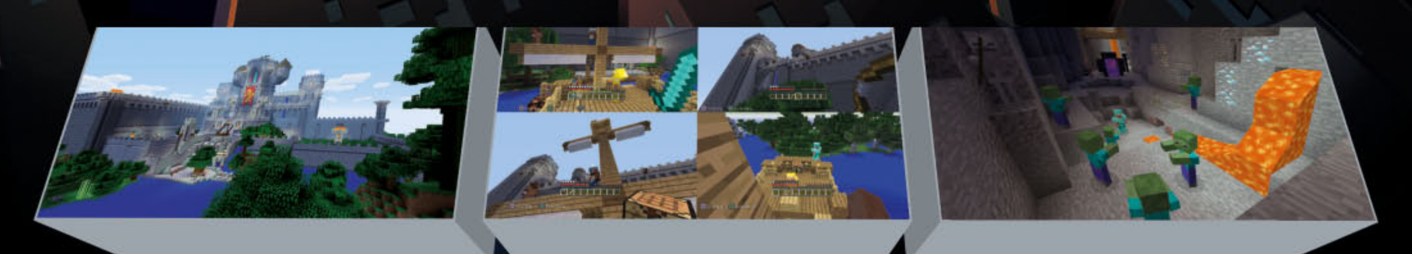
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Dream machine

Virtual reality moves closer with Sony's first showing of its Project Morpheus headset

There's a vast chasm between what virtual reality is right now and what it could be. Today, it takes the form of dazzling tech demos that all but a few can only absorb secondhand; one day, it might be that an accessible, affordable VR headset in every living room transforms how we interact with media, and even how future generations are trained and educated.

As a result, it's easy to get carried away. But there's reason to be excited: Sony's Project Morpheus headset, revealed at GDC as expected, represents another huge step forward for a technology that, before this March, had been largely defined by the team at Oculus VR (which now has serious money behind it, with the announcement following GDC that Facebook had bought it for $2 billion).

Sony's arrival brings in more investment and further validation of the technology, but appropriately for such an intangible concept, Morpheus's unveiling was light on solid details. Its price and release date are unknown, its codename was only decided upon a week before GDC, and the prototype shown on the show floor in San Francisco will continue to evolve, so its capabilities are sure to be very different by the time it ends up on shelves. As a proposition for consumers, it needs a concise explanation and a platform-defining game – CCP's *EVE Valkyrie* is a tantalising glimpse at what this tech might provide, but it's no *Wii Sports*. The demos Sony has shown so far are also short, intuitive VR experiences that do what existing videogames can't without feeling too alien.

The Castle was the more videogame-like of the two firstparty offerings shown at GDC. Grasping two Move controllers, you interact with an empty suit of armour, your virtual hands able to punch, slap, and even grab with a squeeze of the trigger. Later on, cradling a virtual crossbow in our phantom hands makes a simple shooting gallery feel real enough to make us briefly forget we're holding a Move controller, such is the fidelity of the tracking and the resultant immersion of Sony's prototype headset.

The Deep, meanwhile, is an early indication of just how powerful a sense of place can be in VR, seeing you descend into the dark depths of the ocean, awaiting an inevitable shark attack. The sense of anticipation and dread might be too much for those of a sensitive disposition; during Sony's reveal event and afterwards, there was talk of VR experiences potentially overwhelming players if they followed the rules of 'traditional' game design.

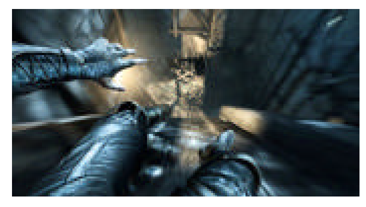
Epic Games CEO Tim Sweeney is familiar with both Morpheus and Rift, and believes that part of the thrill is in feeling out the boundaries of what the tech can do. "It's often counterintuitive – some of the things you could get away with on a television-based game will make you barf," he notes. "Some of the best [VR] experiences are at quite a different pace than you would expect."

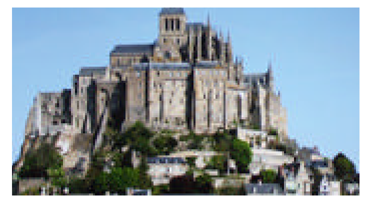
The closest we have to traditional videogames on Morpheus right now ▶



Before Shuhei Yoshida unveiled Morpheus at GDC, he joked of the "cryptic" nature of the presentation. SCEA R&D execs Richard Marks and Anton Mikhailov followed, defining VR's greatest asset as 'presence'. They urged developers to make basic VR interactions feel as real as possible







Sony's *The Castle* demo (above, left) places a Move controller in each hand, a squeeze of the trigger forming a fist or grabbing the hilt of a sword. Meanwhile, while playing VR *Thief* (top), we're told by Sony to avoid using the unoptimised dash move because of the risk of extreme disorientation





From top: Epic CEO Tim Sweeny; CCP's chief marketing officer, David Reid

are a *Thief* demo and *EVE Valkyrie*. In the latter, the stomach-churning effect of a barrel roll and the simpler thrill of just looking about your cockpit are almost enough to make you forget that there's incoming fire to avoid. "It makes for an astonishing three-to-five-minute experience. It's now our responsibility to turn that into a real game," says CCP's **David Reid**. "We are moving swiftly toward a full vertical slice with all of the systems in the game. And from there, [it's about] building more content, more maps, more missions and more modes as we head towards launch."

While *Valkyrie* and its ilk have been fantastic showcases of virtual reality's potential, Sony's arrival in the space lends it a new air of legitimacy and, in the process, raises expectations. Oculus Rift's devkit was made available to anyone prepared to back the project on Kickstarter, its release resulting in a rush of experimental, proof-of-concept prototypes, many made by small, unknown teams. Sony is not making Morpheus for those developers, or at least not solely for them. If Rift proved the concept, Morpheus, with its native PS4 support, will define production values. The challenge is no longer simply how to make VR work in games, but how to make it work in big-budget productions made to sell millions.

> If Rift proved the concept, then Morpheus, with its native PS4 support, will define production values

As motion control and mobile gaming history have made abundantly clear, a shoehorn won't help. While many studios will seek to port existing firstperson games to Morpheus with a few tweaks, it's doubtful that process will bring us any real breakthroughs. "You can probably play *Battlefield* with it and it'd be pretty cool, but I think the most successful games will be the games that are designed exclusively for virtual reality," says Avalanche founder and creative director **Christofer Sundberg**. "Driving games will be absolutely fantastic, and, having seen some of their demos, aural games could be pretty cool, too – that's what fascinated me the most, the sound. I think a game like *The Hunter* would be pretty cool to have in VR. I would love to play a horror game on it, too."

While big publishers get their houses in order, however, Reid expects indies – or the indie spirit, at least – to continue to be at VR's forefront. "We gravitated toward this as an opportunity to not just make a successful business and make a great game, but to be first in a new frontier," he says. "In that spirit, it's typically something you'll find more in the independent developer community, so I would expect the early VR efforts to come from smaller folks who are looking to make a mark on something new, as opposed to expecting it to come from some of the larger publishers."

The bigger companies will have to balance their desire to experiment with new ways to play alongside the need to recoup their investment in an unproven sector. With that in mind, Avalanche CTO **Linus Blomberg**'s pragmatic view is understandable. "It's so difficult with peripherals like that to make a bet before there's actually a market out there," he says. "Obviously, for [Sony's] internal studios it makes sense, but for us it's difficult. But it's really impressive from a technical perspective and everyone I've met that has experienced it has said it's mind-blowing."

As the company behind Unreal Engine 4, Epic is duty-bound to keep pace with new advances and the technical challenges they pose. So it's little surprise that Morpheus and VR in general are uppermost in Sweeney's thoughts. "What's really exciting is thinking about how it's going to evolve in the coming years," he says. "Imagine version five or six of these technologies –



that's when you have a product that could appeal to billions of people. It could fundamentally change the way that you interact with computers, and it'll be able to simulate reality in a way that's so physically accurate that you'll have a very hard time telling the difference between what's real and what's not.

"You have to wonder what it'll be like in the future when children grow up with such high-quality VR that it becomes very hard to distinguish reality from computer gaming. That's really profoundly exciting."

It's also where money comes into it. It's hard not to see Oculus VR's Facebook deal as a response to the emergence of such a well-financed competitor, even if the reality is more complex. Oculus CTO **John Carmack**'s admission after the deal that his company could avoid "several embarrassing scaling crises" is telling. If VR is to survive the mass market, it will not do so driven only by a startup with under $100 million in venture capitalist backing. Whatever Facebook's plans are, the deal puts Rift on a more even footing with Sony, which can click its fingers and source all the components it needs to put Morpheus into production on a scale that the pre-Facebook Oculus could only have dreamed of. If this really is to be VR's second coming, March 2014 should be remembered as the month that changed everything. ■

APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE

Sony's R&D teams have been sharing ideas with NASA throughout its work on the Morpheus project. Even at this early stage, Sony is able to offer NASA a low-cost alternative to the million-dollar military-grade simulations it uses currently. As such, Morpheus has opened virtual reality out to more of NASA's staff for more general use, explains SCEA's Anton Mikhailov. "With consumer VR hardware, [NASA] can get a headset for every one of their scientists. Yes, they're not having the 'NASA experience' but they're having something close, and they're having it on a wider scale. It's a depth vs breadth approach."



Q&A
Anton Mikhailov
Senior software engineer, SCEA R&D



You kept returning to the word 'presence' during the Project Morpheus reveal event – why are you selling that term so hard?
Even when you show [Morpheus] to developers, they ask, "OK, what's the killer app?" And it's a very difficult question, kind of like asking "What's the killer app for TV?" or "What's the killer app for consoles?" I think the reason we focus on presence is that it's a running theme throughout the demos and the content [that] we believe is going to be very good in VR. What the killer app is going to be is transporting you to another environment. And that environment might be passive, it might be like a Zen garden where you just sit and meditate, or it might be barrel rolling a spaceship, which would be super-intense and a completely different experience. But in each case, it's important that you feel like you're actually in that environment. That's the difference between VR and games – what is it that's going to make people put on a VR headset and get the hardware? It's going to be presence, because that's unique to VR. You can get an immersive experience from games, movies and books, but you can't get presence from those media and it's only really possible from VR.

Is there a danger of the effects of wearing the headset being too intense? What can you do about that?
It's difficult to say, because most people are new to it. It's like if you take someone who's never played videogames and put them in front of *Skyrim*, then how long do you think they'll last? It takes a long time and a kind of gaming acclimatisation – in the same way we're looking at VR and saying, "Phew, that was really intense." But who knows? Five years down the line, people might be just used to it – you wake up and you're into VR and go to work. I'm not a futurologist. I don't like to sow those kind of predictions, but I do know that humans have a funny way of acclimatising to technology. So that makes it very hard to predict what's going to stick and what's not. I think it's too early to tell.

What kind of a response have you had from other developers so far?
All the thirdparties we've demoed to have been really excited, and it's something that, when you talk to engineers, it's all they want to do. When business people get involved, it's a question of what's the return, installed base, so on and so forth.

Yes, while there is some risk in developing for new technology, there's also a huge opportunity, because like Michael Abrash has said in his Valve talks, whoever makes the first huge app for VR is going to hit it really big. I think the excitement of being the pioneer in the field is going to draw a lot of people in. Maybe [fewer] of the bigger publishers, at least at first, but I think the indies will be excited. And we've been very indie-friendly at PlayStation lately. It's not by accident. There are many different ways to approach this, so of course there's the firstparty studios – you've seen the content from London Studio, and all of the firstparty studios have devkits. There are definitely internal developments going on.

What conversations have you had with Oculus and Valve?
We think that they're all doing fantastic work and we're all in this space to basically bring VR to reality – we've been promised VR for so long that it's kind of overdue. I think we're all on the same page and working towards the same goal. I don't have any partnerships to announce at this time, [but] we're all on very friendly terms.

You've suggested that Move was designed as a VR controller from the beginning – what's the story there?
Effectively Move is a VR wand in disguise as a motion controller. So we specced it and built it to be a VR controller, even though VR wasn't a commodity. As engineers, we just said it was the right thing to do. If you look online, a lot of universities use it as a VR device using move.me for PS3 – an application for scientists who use the Move tracking hardware. At the time, we didn't have a consumer-grade project that we could work on, but it was definitely designed with that vision in mind.

What can you tell us about Morpheus's eventual price and release date?
We wouldn't be doing this if we didn't know that we could make this for an affordable price. Obviously, there's a wide range of what people consider affordable, but this is going to be a consumer-grade device. The reason we're announcing this now is because before we couldn't see a path to product and now we can see some way to accomplish a product that's valuable for the console market.

How does the Morpheus tech compare to the HMZ headsets Sony produces today?
The difference between this and the HMZ line is that our focus has always been on gaming. So our display design is different from the personal viewer display the HMZ has. Their goal is to simulate a theatre experience in your living room – to make a large screen or large TV experience that might not fit in your apartment. Their focus is less immersive and more replicating that theatre experience. VR for games has a different purpose compared to VR for TV and movies, so they're different product lines, although they both sit on your head and have displays in them.

The state of independents

BitSummit brings together the good, the bad and the just plain weird of Japan's DIY scene

Now in its second year, BitSummit saw a major increase in size and attendance when it was held in Kyoto in March. Previously a one-day, business-only event, this year's show was held over three days at the Miyako Messe convention centre, with over 100 developers, live music and presentations. The first of two public days drew 1,000 curious punters, from the hardcore to families with young children. And although Kyoto giant Nintendo was conspicuous by its absence, financial supporters included Sony, Microsoft and the prefectural government.

"Since last year's BitSummit, a lot of us have come to realise that we are in fact part of an indie scene," says **Takumi Naramura** of Nigoro, whose platform-adventure sequel *La-Mulana 2* was recently crowdfunded on Kickstarter. "Many developers heard about last year's BitSummit and made the effort to get involved this year."

"It's a good thing Japan can borrow strength from westerners to put on an event like this together"

The nature of that realisation might seem surprising to western indies, whose culture of cooperation and idea sharing has fostered a boom in the scene over the past half-decade. In Japan, even the notion of a 'scene' is new and the idea of sharing was, until recently, absurd.

"It's more fun for me than Tokyo Game Show, because of all the different types of games you get to see," says **Dylan Cuthbert**, whose Kyoto company Q-Games was involved in the event's production. Many of those games have already secured an international release. Some, like *La-Mulana 2* and **Keiji Inafune**'s *Mighty No.9*, raised funds directly from fans, while others have taken advantage of Sony's increased hunger for indie games, such as puzzler *TorqueL* and mecha remake *Assault Suit Leynos* (*Target Earth*). Small mainstream publishers continue to find their own route to market, such as O-Two with its cute 3DS kitty runner *Mew Mew Train*. Online platforms such as Flash game repository Moritapo Game Lounge and global store Playism had booths showcasing multiple titles. For the smaller developers, it was a rare opportunity to watch their peers and members of the public play their games.

"When you're making a fighting game, it is extremely useful to have the opportunity to watch people play for balance tuning," says **Masahiro Onoguchi**, creator of moddable 3D fighting engine *EF-12*, recently Greenlit for Steam. "Some very skilled players gave me their feedback yesterday and I was able to immediately implement their suggestions last night."

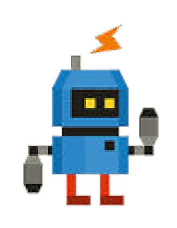
Around half the games on show were made by hobbyists. Many felt like tech demos or proof-of-concept pieces with rudimentary gameplay, or straight copies of classic titles. Inafune might have noticed his own work in *Rokko Chan*, King Soukutu's *Mega Man* homage.

That's not to say these micro-indie games were bad – 2D Fantasista's *Flock* is a relaxing ambient bullet-heaven shooter for PS4, while madcap Flash platformer *Shippo Neko* and a game called *ChChoCoooCoCo* (which uses a pump-nozzle shampoo bottle as its controller) raised smiles. This was different to the kind of spectacle you find at strait-laced TGS, and with a Japanese sensibility lacking at GDC.





From top: BitSummit organiser James Mielke; Takumi Naramura of Nigoro





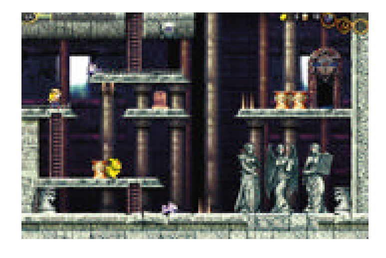
Nom Nom Galaxy, Q-Games' soup-creation simulation

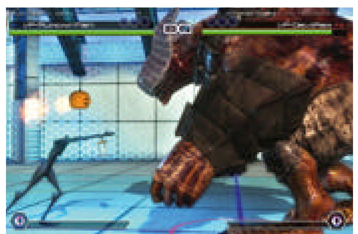
Still, games with the depth of *Journey* or the conceptual complexity of *Gone Home* were scarce. The exceptions were usually games made by Japan-based studios with largely western staff, such as Q-Games' *Nom Nom Galaxy*. There were also few women developers, and those who were there tended to be touting visual novels, or were in supporting roles, such as *The Girl And The Robot* illustrator Ayaka Nakamura.

Naramura was one of several devs to say that Japan's indie scene is trailing the west's by a couple of years, and organiser **James Mielke** says this was why he invited western indies such as The Behemoth and Metanet Software to show off *Castle Crashers* and *N++*. "I think Japanese developers can take away a lot from being exposed to those games," he says. "[They] will see something like *Overgrowth*, *N++* or *Galak-Z* and think, 'Wow, I can add an extra layer of narrative or a cool new mechanic; I can do something different'. It might take a few years, but I think we'll get there."

Inafune, who announced a new 3DS game at BitSummit – Inti Creates' *Azure Striker Gunvolt*, on which he is executive producer – tells us he believes that the simple mix of western and Japanese organisers was a key factor behind the show's success, and a reason so many Japanese developers were willing to risk the not-insignificant investment to attend.

"Having Mielke in charge gives it an international feeling," Inafune says. "It's a good thing Japan can borrow strength from westerners to put on an event like this together. I was surprised by the scale of everyone's ambition." ■





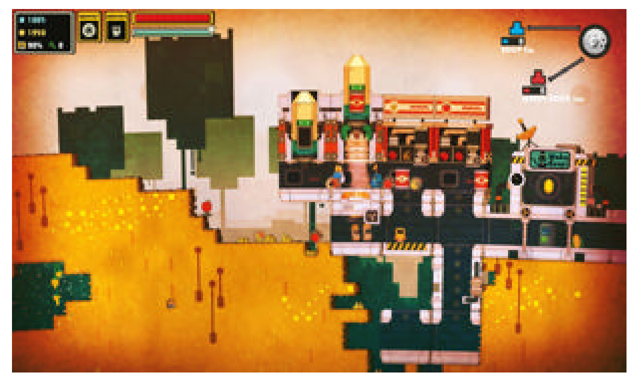
La-Mulana 2 (top) and *EF-12* (above) are among a wave of acclaimed Japanese titles coming to Steam. Meanwhile, Professor Sakamoto's live Famicom tunes soundtracked the event (below)



Prize-winning *Crazy Taxi* clone *The Modern Zombie Taxi Driver* was one of many games that reprised old playstyles





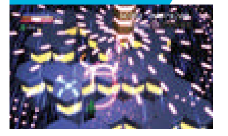


Q-Games used BitSummit to show a new build of *PixelJunk Inc*, now renamed *Nom Nom Galaxy* (above). *Shippo Neko And The Missing Fried Shrimp* (right) bases its art style on wood block printing. *Kira Kira Star Night* (centre) is being directed by comic artist RIKI



PLATFORM GAMES

Sony and Microsoft were on the lookout for indie talent



Sony and Microsoft were among the event sponsors, with booths showcasing their commitment to indies. "We've been chatting with developers to find titles our customers might enjoy," **Akinari Ito** from Sony's developer relations told us.

Xbox One is still unreleased in Japan, but some devs, recognising Xbox's overseas audience and tempted by free devkits, signed up for ID@ Xbox. Microsoft's program manager **Hidekatsu Matsuyama** is happy to see the initiative work here: "We'd like to help Japanese developers to be successful all over the world. And to make Xbox One a success in Japan, we need Japanese content, so we need their help."

Start your engine

Your chance to win a Unity Pro licence and a trip to Unite 2014 in our third independent game contest

We're now inviting entries for the third instalment of our annual game-creation competition, the Get Into Games Challenge, in association with Sony. Launched on www.edge-online.com on April 1, the theme is 'protest'.

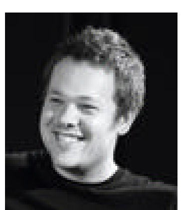
Your game might be about protest, or be a protest in and of itself. It may comprise picket lines or emphatic denial. Those are merely suggestions, though – you can interpret the theme however you like. Your game will be judged against three main criteria: your creative interpretation of the theme; the game's technical merit; and the originality of the concept.

As in previous competitions, the **Edge** team will judge each entry alongside a panel of notable industry figures. This year, the judges are Lionhead and Games Workshop co-founder Steve Jackson; *Thomas Was Alone* and *Volume* creator Mike Bithell; David Helgason, CEO of Unity; *Dear Esther* creator and The Chinese Room creative director Dan Pinchbeck; and Lucas Pope, creator of dystopian document thriller *Papers, Please*.

The winner and two runners-up will each win a full Unity Pro licence, which includes iOS Pro, Android Pro and Team License add-ons, a package worth $5,000. The overall winner will also receive the coveted Get Into Games Challenge trophy, designed by **Edge**'s art team, and a trip for one to Unite '14, Unity's annual developer conference. This year's event takes place in Seattle from August 20 to 22, and the winner will receive return flights and three nights' accommodation along with their ticket.

Your game might be about protest, or a protest in and of itself, comprise picket lines or emphatic denial

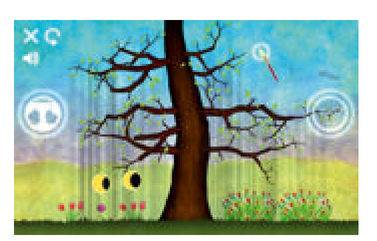
Last year, the challenge's theme was 'do no harm', and it attracted more than 70 entries from all around the world. The winners were German developers Fabian Schaub and Thomas Krüeger, whose lateral-thinking-focused block-dropping puzzler charmed the judges. The game tasks you with arranging a series of spiky shapes as they fall towards a star in the centre of the screen, increasing the size of the core as they land, while also making sure any sharp edges don't touch the growing central mass in the process.







This year's judging panel is, from left to right: Mike Bithell, Steve Jackson, Dr Dan Pinchbeck, David Helgason and Lucas Pope



The laid-back *Let There Be Life*, from Backward Pies, took second place in 2013's GIG Challenge







www.bit.ly/VxbEU1
More details on this year's GIG Challenge

Husband-and-wife team Backward Pies secured the first runner-up spot with relaxing puzzle game *Let There Be Life*. Now available on IndieGameStand, the game is about growing by attaching branches and foliage to a tree trunk without depriving the flowers that grow beneath it of light, but also providing shade for neighbouring mushrooms.

And third place went to student programmer Stefen Rodger's amusingly named *Personal Space Invaders*, which subverts the notion of the shooter genre by insisting you only fire warning shots. The closer your shot is to the enemy, the more points you get, but it's game over if you accidentally land a bullseye.

Visit www.edge-online.com/get-into-games for details on the closing date, full terms and conditions, as well as tips and guides on developing in Unity. ■




















GET INTO GAMES
CHALLENGE 2014

Develop evolves

The UK's foremost industry conference introduces free indie sessions and its first ever Game Jam for 2014



This year's Develop conference will take place July 8–10 in its usual home, Brighton, and will introduce a number of new tracks and sessions.

Foremost among these is the inaugural Develop Game Jam, which will take place during the main conference (Wednesday 9 and Thursday 10). The theme is yet to be set, but the conference organisers are taking team submissions for the 48-hour coding competition now.

Prior to that, on the first day of the conference, Develop will hold its regular Evolve day – an exploration of the cutting edge, and future, of game development, from console gaming to hardware-agnostic experiences and virtual reality in your living room. As well as talks from developers, including *SkyDIEving* studio nDreams, which will discuss its upcoming Oculus Rift game, Evolve will also feature a psychology sub-track for the first time.

This will explore the ways in which developers are working with psychologists to shape design decisions, monetisation and other areas of games, and will also highlight the ethical issues of employing such strategies. The track will look at both real-world examples of applied psychology and the ongoing areas of research within the gaming sector.

The main conference also has a new track that will focus on marketing, and joins the existing design, art, coding, business, audio and production threads. This new section will examine the increasingly essential art of marketing your game successfully, irrespective of whether you're a multi-studio developer or a bedroom coder. Speakers such as Simon Byron, director of games at UK PR agency Premier, and Jason Avent, who co-founded Brighton-based studio Boss Alien, will offer advice on building audience engagement without undermining the integrity of your game.

> Develop's regular Evolve day will be an exploration of the cutting edge, and future, of game development

Capybara's Nathan Vella, one of the brains behind *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* and currently working on *Super Time Force* and *Below*, will deliver the indie track keynote. He'll be joined by other indie big hitters, such as *Thomas Was Alone* creator Mike Bithell and Dlala Studios' AJ Grand-Scrutton, and the track will be supported by another new addition: Indie Boot Camp.

Boot Camp sessions will be free to attend and will centre on real-world guidance to making your startup a success, with a selection of established indie voices offering their advice and examples of the mistakes they made along the way. There will also be an indie development showcase, which will highlight some of the best new projects currently in production.

There are big names elsewhere, too. David Braben, Peter Molyneux and Mark Cerny will all deliver talks for the design track, while artists will benefit from a keynote address from Aardman Studios' Gavin Strange as well as sessions by Media Molecule's Rex Crowle – responsible for *Tearaway*'s charming visual design – and Sony Computer Entertainment art director Joel Smith.

Another Media Molecule face is studio director Siobhan Reddy who, together with Bossa Studios' Roberta Lucca, will head up the business track with a joint keynote. Other confirmed speakers across all the tracks include EMEA regional director of Twitch, Stuart Saw; game designer and AI specialist Richard Evans, offering a session on coding; and ExPlay director and former Remode CEO Ella Romanos, who will talk about game design. ■

Additions to the three-day event include the Indie Boot Camp and a new marketing track

NETWORK OFFLINE

With so much to take in, and so many speakers, your brain may need lubrication. Thankfully, this year's Develop offers plenty of opportunities to do so, starting with the welcome drinks on Tuesday evening following Evolve. You can then go straight to the GamesAid charity poker tournament, which could be good background research for this year's game psychology sub-track. A booth crawl on Wednesday afternoon will give you an informal opportunity to take in the show, and, of course, there's Develop's Industry Excellence Awards on Wednesday evening.





CROWDED VISION

Why one studio is basing a game on everybody else's ideas

Crowdfunding is commonplace nowadays, but crowdsourcing game design is another matter. That makes *#IDARB* (*It Draws A Red Box*) stand out, with creator Other Ocean Interactive soliciting suggestions via Twitter. The game started life as a side project, the team putting in nights and weekends on *#IDARB* while working on traditional titles during the week, but an open request for ideas has become its driving force.

"It reaffirmed something we inherently knew but sometimes forgot: dumb games rule," Other Ocean's **Frank Cifaldi** tells us. "Hardly anyone has questioned the logic, the art style, or our weird crowdsourcing method so far; everyone seems to be on the same page. We've often said that our dream as independent developers is to make dumb games for smart people, and that dream is becoming a reality."

At the time of writing, *#IDARB* takes the form of an eightplayer platformer with a ball, jetpacks and two goals, but that may change. Whatever the case, its character creation tool – some of whose results can be seen here – will be along for the ride. ■

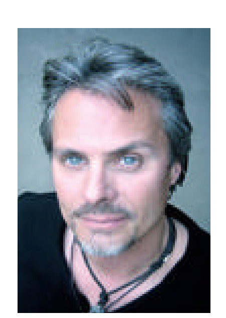
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"**Sony has won a lot of loyalty** by having been approachable for the past few years, while Microsoft needs to fight an image of being terrible to work with."

Rami Ismail spells out the challenge facing ID@Xbox



"Someone made a decision that the shareholders are more important than the customer… **How do you blow that?** How do you take that fucking jewel and ship it with dirt all over it?"

Lorne Lanning calls out EA for the state of *Battlefield 4*



"**Internet threats are terrifying** [because] this behaviour [has become] an expected response to something someone doesn't like. Internet toxicity has the power to shit on something beautiful and destroy it."

Ex-Microsoft man **Adam Orth** has suffered more than most

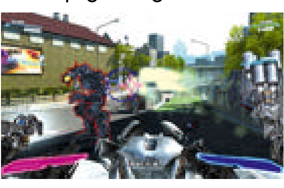
"When I was in the corporate world, I was safe. There was predictability, contentment, security… We all crave those things, but for design and innovation, **they are fucking death**."



There's no safety for **Peter Molyneux** now that he's left EA and Microsoft behind

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Transformers Human Alliance*
Manufacturer Sega

Sega is still a force to be reckoned with on the Japanese arcade scene, where *Virtua Fighter 5* swallows yen by the handful, but the publisher is still pushing the kinds of games able to make money elsewhere. Hence *Transformers Human Alliance*, the most notable Sega cabinet to make the journey west recently.

Human Alliance is a fixed gun game set across five levels where you'll fight alongside Autobots against the Decepticons. It is, in other words, exactly the game you'd expect, running on Sega's Ringedge 2 PC-in-a-box and developed by the same Chinese studio behind 2012 racing game *KO Drive*. Its gimmicks are Alliance Fire, where two players targeting the same spot will automatically call in fire support from the Autobots, and a series of gun-controlled QTE sequences.

The standard *Human Alliance* cabinet packs a 42-inch screen in a standup form factor, but if you're lucky you'll find the massive 55-inch sit-down 'cinema' version. It's the first of Sega's 2014 arcade games to come west and its absolute simplicity will ensure it a wide audience. It's a classic Sega shooter, and in a world where the company's better known for *Total War* than for *Virtua Cop*, it's an exciting arrival in any arcade.



My Favourite Game
Tinie Tempah

The UK musician has a strong rapport with Mario and the 16bit era, but none at all with the online multiplayer revolution

London-born rapper and producer **Tinie Tempah**, AKA Patrick Chukwuemeka Okogwu, scored a UK number one in 2010 with his debut single Pass Out. Its parent album, Disc-Overy, was a worldwide hit. He's a man in demand now, but he still finds time for gaming.

Given how busy you are, when do you find time to play games nowadays, and what do they mean to you?
Gaming is a release. It means time off, even when we're on the road, because we've always got a few consoles on the tourbus. When I think about gaming, I think about downtime. But I don't find it so easy to get into games today, compared to how I used to. Perhaps that's because they can be so long. But I do find time to play more basic games. I like playing sports ones like *FIFA*, the *Mario* games, and I like fighting games – ones that I can just play a couple of rounds of.

What was the last game that you were so into that you couldn't put it down?
I got into *FIFA 14* over the Christmas holiday, and I really couldn't put that down. I have a similar problem with the *Fight Night* games, too. I don't play online multiplayers, though. I know it's the revolution and everything, but the idea of me playing against some 14-year-old and them calling me a wanker over the headset, I can't get my head around that.

Do you identify yourself as a gamer, with the stereotype that entails?
I definitely consider myself a gamer. I'm a young man, and it's one of my favourite pastimes. I think we're all gamers these days. It doesn't matter what type of person you are. Gaming itself doesn't define you as a person – you can be anyone and if you've got a smartphone with *Temple Run* on it, you're a gamer.

FRISKY BUSINESS
After issuing a series of mixtapes, Tempah got his breakthrough with Pass Out, and the Labrinth-produced single catapulted him into the mainstream in the spring of 2010. He's since released two long-players – Disc-Overy in 2010 and Demonstration in 2013 – and has won multiple awards at the Brits, Ivor Novellos, MOBOs and more. His music has been licensed for use in several videogames, including *Def Jam Rapstar*, but he also stars in a self-titled Flash game based on his Disc-Overy album, which was informed by ideas from his fans.




What was your earliest experience with videogames?
When I was young, we had a SNES, and we had *Super Mario All-Stars* for it. We didn't have many other games for the SNES for a while, but there were enough on this one cartridge to keep us busy. I remember at school you had the Sega heads and the Nintendo heads, and it did feel, back then, that Sega was that little bit cooler. But looking at it now, I guess Nintendo had the last laugh. I have a younger brother and two younger sisters, so Nintendo felt like the more family-friendly option, whereas Sega games seemed like they were a bit more grown up.

> "Back then, Sega was that little bit cooler. But looking at it now, I guess Nintendo had the last laugh"

Coming up to date, have you made a call between Xbox One and PlayStation 4 yet?
I have a PS4, which I think is wonderful. Sony has done a lot to keep its existing fanbase happy, ticking a lot of boxes. I remember when the first PlayStation came out. I really wanted one but my parents could never afford it. I'm lucky that I can now afford any of the new consoles, and I'm really in a fresh phase of loving gaming.

Your music has, in the past, reflected some of the 16bit sounds of your youth.
Yeah, both Pass Out and Frisky, those tracks had these 8bit, these 16bit sounds in them, and that was definitely done to capture the vibe of that era of gaming. It's the vibe we were going for. I was thinking back to the sounds I heard playing games as a kid: the soundtracks of the *Mario* games, of *Tetris*, that real digital sound. Whenever I think back to *Mario* games, there's that music that comes on when Bowser first appears. I'll never forget that, and whenever I hear it I'm right back there, playing that game as a kid. You know, der-der-derr-derrr! And there's the main *Mario* theme, which is just classic.

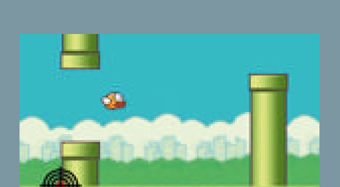
And what's your favourite game?
I guess I'd have to say *Super Mario All-Stars*. I play a lot of modern games; I love the *Metal Gear Solid* series, and I'm really into the *GTA* games, too. But with *Mario*, whatever the era, you know what you're going to get. Those games are adventures of the highest order… They have these classic fairytale qualities to them. Here's a man, and he has to rescue a princess, and there's a castle. In many respects, it's a simple, straightforward proposition, but it's very pure… Even the new *Mario* games – I've got *Super Mario 3D World* – retain that playability of the 2D originals. *Mario* games, they're all like playgrounds – playgrounds in which you can just do anything and everything. ■



Tempah was born in 1988, and has fond memories of the 16bit era, which shaped the chiptune-like production of tracks such as Pass Out and Frisky

WEBSITE
Create Your Own Flappy Game
www.bit.ly/1bQpzg0

Dong Nguyen's viral hit may have been the app that spawned a million clones, but why play other people's knockoffs when you could piece together the game yourself in a little under ten minutes? *Flappy Bird*'s simple yet brutal template is an ideal lens through which to teach core game logic, as computer science advocacy group Code.org proves in this ten-step workshop. Each asks you to assemble blocks of actions and conditions into chains to complete a basic task, walking you through replicating the titular bird's graceless flaps as well as failstates and scoring. What could be dryly academic is enlivened by room to tinker – you're increasingly free to bend rules. The end result is derivative, sure, but every fledging artist starts out by carefully observing their peers.





VIDEO
Fusion vs fission
www.bit.ly/OX3UbJ

A misanthropic sociopath might seem like a poor choice to front any education and public outreach programme, but the team behind NASA's Spitzer space telescope has hired GLaDOS anyway. Well, voice actress Ellen McLain at any rate. McLain reprises her role in a STEM-learning video that sees the beleaguered AI explaining the difference between nuclear fusion and fission to two hapless engineers to get herself hooked up to NASA's servers. It's entertaining, and makes us wish the science videos we were made to sit through in school had half of GLaDOS's cold, inimitable charm.

WEB GAME
Icarus Proudbottom's World Of Typing Weekly
www.bit.ly/1l6AUcF

When *Icarus Proudbottom's World Of Typing Weekly*'s pilot episode comes to an end, the eponymous Proudbottom lies dead. It's your job to find out who did it, of course, and you'll do this by typing as quickly and accurately as you can, losing health for every duff press. Just like the previous game, *Teaches Typing*, the passages that fill the screen are increasingly surreal, and usually funny. This time, however, you're deputised by the officer investigating the crime and must investigate the crime scene and cross-examine the suspects, which include Jerry, Proudbottom's owl spirit animal and former partner. Accurate typing fills your Soul Gauge, which gives you score multipliers and extra health once activated with the tilde key. All five episodes are available to play now.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

The attention siphons that distracted us during the production of **E**266

CONSOLE
Arduboy
Kevin Bates

Photographer and programmer Kevin Bates' business-card-sized console can display his résumé onscreen, but is also capable of playing simple games, including *Tetris* and *Flappy Ball*. *Ardumon*, a take on *Pokémon*, is also in the works. The project is based on a diminutive Arduino Pro Mini board and features an OLED screen, a speaker, and capacitive touchpads for control. The concept proved popular after Bates posted a video on YouTube, and now he plans to launch a Kickstarter campaign in order to sell self-assembly kits for $30 and a limited number of preassembled units for $50. No word yet on pale nimbus, eggshell or bone versions, though.



continue

The blue pill
Project Morpheus gives developers a second reason to invest in VR

One vision
Spring's update sees Xbox One focus on games, refreshingly

Titan security
Respawn burns cheaters by plunging them into an aimbot battle royale

Naughty treat
The Last Of Us coming to PS4? Any excuse to rejoin Joel and Ellie

quit

The red pill
Microsoft's rumoured AR headset isn't what players want. Again

Resolution wars
Titanfall runs at 792p? At this rate, we'll be back to SCART soon

Kickback
If *Pillars Of Eternity* can get signed by Paradox, did it need Kickstarter?

Decapre
Ultra Street Fighter IV gets a Cammy reskin but no Mike Haggar?

TWEETS

I believe the following with all of my heart: "videogame" is one word, not two.
Douglas Wilson @doougle
Co-owner, Die Gute Fabrik

We're two years away from consumers being able to pre-purchase sequels to games in alpha.
Fork Parker @ForkParker
CFO, Devolver Digital

At a fancy dinner with a lot of early dev survivors of 2000–2004 Microsoft publishing. So many stories of PMSD. (Post-MS stress disorder)
Tim Schafer @TimOfLegend
CEO, Double Fine

Trivia: I had suggested to Sony that they try to hire Palmer Luckey before the Oculus kickstarter.
John Carmack @ID_AA_Carmack
CTO, Oculus VR





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DISPATCHES MAY



Issue 265

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an Ear Force PX4 headset from Turtle Beach Inc





Turtle Beach's **Ear Force PX4** (RRP £149.99) is compatible with PS4, Xbox One and PC setups

All about the Benjamins

I recently interviewed at a famous free-to-play MMORPG publisher. What started as a promising session of enthusiastic and heartfelt exchanges about our common passion for videogames quickly turned into a heartbreaking series of disillusions as, one after the other, my interviewers kept bluntly declaring revenues were all that mattered, the benchmark by which the value of its people was measured, and the quintessential goal of any of their endeavours. They prided themselves in copycatting gameplay recipes that have been proven to work in Asian markets, simply importing them with a new skin for the western audience. As I listened to the relentless urges of the offended gamer's voice inside me, I dared ask about the place that the quality of the game had in that setup, but my question was quickly brushed aside. While certainly a nice supplement, a passion for quality and a willingness to continuously improve games were by all means not an absolute necessity for any aspiring employee.

I was filled with indignation, frustration and irrational anger at the off-handedness with which this company treated game development and the players, and at the very idea of such a dehumanisation of game production, which went against all the fantasies I had always entertained about game developers and their purpose. These ones were dedicating all their creative spirit to find every single most innovative way of milking players. Don't get me wrong: profit has to be the natural goal of every business. But indulging in a shameless excusing of extracting every possible penny out of the players in front of interviewing candidates mocked all that I ever held dear in the artistic endeavour of creating videogames.

To my eyes, this experience has dramatically put in perspective the backlash triple-A publishers have been consistently receiving for shortening game experiences while not limiting the endless inflation of retail prices with the passing of console generations. Behind these triple-A titles, there are still passionate and creative talents who put their efforts towards creating high-quality products for a simple reason: if quality was sacrificed for easy monetisation, how would they justify the high price tag? Behind them, there are still teams that want to make videogames for their ultimate purposes: entertainment, pleasure, wonder.

This is not a campaign against free-to-play, which certainly has a number of merits as a business model. However, the rise of free-to-play will have consequences of which the full magnitude is yet unknown. One of its main perverse effects is that it has allowed for the emergence of a new and unique type of company previously alien to the videogame industry: game publishers devoid of any game sensitivity. There are now exclusively metrics-driven, results-obsessed corporate creatures whose only purpose is to enhance the monetisation of games as they would the monetisation of vacuum cleaners, a policy infecting and capping developers' artistic ambitions with the practical imperatives of revenue generation. Although numerous free-to-play titles are of high quality and rightfully receive praise, this business model has at the same time allowed for easy-money companies to be born at an alarming rate, and swarm onto mobile and PC game marketplaces at the expense of players.

"The rise of free-to-play will have consequences of which the full magnitude is yet unknown"

Passion for games is a nice bonus for any person applying to these companies, but being a successful car dealer would catch their attention far more. After all, if you can skilfully sell a vehicle, what's to prevent you from being a stellar salesman for virtual swords and mounts? Your background,



interest or knowledge of games all matter not, only your ability to deliver on revenue targets. So if you can get across with numbers, you're in. Games are commodified and it's not about creating the best content, only the highest-revenue-generating content. In this new paradigm, game producers are no longer there to make suggestions to improve the players' experience, only to make it more profitable.

Games are about the players. Could there be an uglier concept for a publisher than that of sacrificing quality for easy copycat revenue? Developers should be willing to create unforgettable experiences, not bending their gameplay to accommodate the whims of free-to-play publishers. Real progress cannot be quantified in growth rates, average revenues per user or churn, so one crucial question remains: is this model helping the industry live up to its ambitions to be recognised as an entertainment medium on par with other artforms?

When machines are able to make more informed decisions than humans on which gift bundle and events generate higher revenues in a game, a wave of unemployment will suddenly crash over these publishers' employees. Is there truly no additional value to these people? Coming out of the interview room, I was waiting for them to show me that there was a soul somewhere within the shell of this company. But as I participated in a last round of handshakes, walked down the long corridor towards the exit and closed the door of the building behind me, I never glimpsed it.
Name supplied

Free-to-play copycats may not last, but their potential impact on a generation of developers is a huge concern. Good luck with finding something more appropriate soon. In the meantime, a prize is on its way.

A quote quibble

In issue 265, you reiterated **Shigeru Miyamoto**'s famous quote: "A delayed game is eventually good; a bad game is bad forever." Like most followers of the videogame industry, I have great respect for Miyamoto's achievements, but every time I see this quote I feel that it is not as insightful as it first appears.

Firstly, many delayed games are not, in fact, any good. Sometimes this can be because the project turns in to a death march, or because the game misses its zeitgeist moment.

Secondly, the implication of the quote is that a rushed game will almost always be a bad game. Again, this is not true. It is not easy to provide examples; generally the developers of projects that were rushed but turned out well don't like to dwell on it. Nevertheless, we often read about games launching with a reduced featureset, and in many cases these are great games.

Let's keep quoting industry heroes, by all means, but only when their quotes stand up to close inspection.
Chris Tomkins

Doesn't that quote seem more appropriate than ever in an era where console devs ship in haste and repent across endless patches? But fair enough – the next time we see Miyamoto, we'll sort him out.

An Oculus rift

I watched with a mix of amusement and resignation as my friends took to their Facebook accounts to decry its creator's purchase of Oculus. The Rift headset will now, if their fears are to be believed, become a tastelessly branded feed-viewer reduced to running stereoscopic versions of *FarmVille* and *Bejeweled*. This is patently ridiculous.

There seems to be some general sense of betrayal – that a scrappy, crowdfunded company finding further investment somehow undermines the pledges made on Kickstarter. But that campaign was all about making the technology work. Prototypes are already available, so it did the job, and while it's understandable that a sense of ownership would be attached to people funding a device with their own money, they seem to be forgetting that Rift is still far from ready for the average consumer.

In order to get to that point, Oculus needs the money of a larger, established company, and Facebook's vision for using VR in social ways can, as far as I can see, only be a positive thing for Rift. If Facebook can follow through and make the VR headset a mainstream device, then that only increases its appeal as a gaming platform and will attract more developers. That Facebook has no VR experience isn't a bad thing either – it means it will look to Palmer Luckey and John Carmack for guidance. And as for those *FarmVille* fears, it makes little sense for Facebook to abandon the work already undertaken by the likes of Frontier and CCP for the device.

Mojang's decision to drop out is stupid too (Notch citing his concerns over the "creepy" and "unstable" nature of Facebook on social media), considering that the developer was happy to work so closely with Microsoft, a company facing repeated privacy invasion accusations and that has been criticised for its unclear vision.

In his open letter, Palmer Luckey reiterates his desire to make VR available to everyone. While it might initially seem like an odd fit, if you take some time to consider the potential before angrily updating your status, it's easy to see why Luckey chose to go ahead with the deal. All of this depends on both companies following through on their promises, of course, but the point is that it's too early to judge – especially not when your opinion is founded in paranoia. However it turns out, we can at least be sure that with Facebook's financial might behind him, Luckey is in a better position than ever to move his virtual vision into reality.
D Foster

Successful companies diversify, but we shouldn't let that sort of thing get in the way of some good old-fashioned ranting. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

For a handheld console – or any kind of console, actually – Vita has an awful lot of control options. A touchscreen, dual sticks, a D-pad, buttons, motion sensing, and the rear touchpad, which always makes me feel a little bit like a '70s radio legend trying to put his hand up an unsuspecting teenager's skirt. And yet with all these control options, there's another one that now feels missing. Trust that goat-fancying visionary Jeff Minter to make me wish Vita had a rotary paddle as well.

I am playing *TxK*, of course, a beautifully waxed Ferrari of what Yak himself calls the "neo-retro arcade shooter". The only problem is that when the controls of a *Tempest*-alike game are left-right rather than clockwise-counterclockwise, they effectively get reversed when you're up round the top of a circular level – pushing the stick left makes you go right and vice versa. Cue innumerable farcical deaths as I shunt myself with alacrity right into an enemy instead of into the powerups in the other direction.

But gradually I get used to it. And everything else about the game is pure psychoelectronic opiates. Yes, *TxK* is the best game of *Tempest* you can possibly play without owning an original *Tempest* cabinet. And even then, many things about *TxK* are more fun and charming than the original. The ecstatically repeated cries of "Yes yes yes yes yes" when you ace a level, as though James Joyce's Molly Bloom were on an LSD-inspired interstellar odyssey. The overwhelming sense of relief and power when you obtain the ability to jump. Plus Llamasoft's brilliantly player-friendly 'Restart Best' system.

Yet, of course, it's still basically *Tempest*. *TxK* is a remake of and improvement on Minter's own *T3K* and *Tempest 2000*, not to mention *Space Giraffe*, which were all remakes of *Tempest*. And yet no one bombards Minter with death threats for his relentless work of digital homage. This is what artists in mature artforms do: Michael Nyman plundered Purcell; William Shakespeare nicked stories anywhere he could find them; Heat, Michael Mann's masterpiece, improves in every way on its inspiration, Mann's own earlier film LA Takedown. And so on.



Illustration marshdavies.com

This is what artists in mature artforms do: Michael Nyman plundered Purcell; William Shakespeare nicked stories

So what is the difference between *TxK* and *Flappy Bird*? Why does Jeff Minter get the (thoroughly deserved) plaudits, while Dong Nguyen was hounded by moralising pedants claiming he'd ripped off the iconic Nintendo pipe design, to the point where Nguyen temporarily removed the game from sale?

When this sorry story broke, many videogame commentators engaged in various more-or-less humiliating acts of public self-flagellation, wondering why they and their culture were so nasty. Was there an element of racism in the barracking of an obscure Korean guy, where an all-American brogrammer might have been embraced by the 'community'? Possibly.

But I think the critical difference boils down to the difference between the games. Where *TxK* is deliberately more friendly and approachable than Llamasoft's uncompromising previous output, *Flappy Bird* is so hard that it makes 'hardcore' seem like a really floppy word. It's so hard that you can spend half an hour on it without scoring over five points. But while being amazingly hard, it's also amazingly cute. There is real artistry in the pixel-perfect personality of your bird. This much difficulty and this much lovability should not coexist. Über-hard games are usually blockily utilitarian (*VVVVVV*) or abstractly, geometrically beautiful (*Super Hexagon*), but rarely cartoonily nice. Hard and cute does not compute.

Flappy Bird is so cute-hard, I think, that people who got addicted to it suspected that they had been tricked. (Dudes, of course you were tricked! Psychological manipulation is a fundamental component of any artform!) And this trickster guy, who had tricked everyone into playing his stupid impossible game, was reportedly making $50,000 a day from it. Obviously, that was just not fair. And so jealousy entered the equation, too. The App Store is the California gold rush of our day: people move out there and dream of making untold riches. This guy did, with a trick game so simple anyone could have made it. But he did and I didn't. Bastard.

These, then, are the real reasons why Nguyen was hounded into near-silence, while Minter is justly celebrated. *TxK* is a portal into outer space, daubed in exciting colours and with a moreishly banging soundtrack. But *Flappy Bird* was a mirror into the troubled, angry souls of its players.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



GET INTO GAMES

CHALLENGE 2014



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IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

Morning television is the freight train of fitness trends. These breakfast shows introduce families to lightweight takes on current events and fashions. The first morning show aired in 1952, and its audience was primarily stay-at-home mothers. While much has changed, US morning shows such as Today and Sunrise still sell traditionalism, including the latest health trends or fitness gizmos, topics that have traditionally appealed to women.

A decade ago, breakfast shows started to advocate videogames rather than decry their villainy. In 2002, the home console version of *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*) made an appearance on Today. Then in early 2004, high-end *DDR* mat manufacturer RedOctane started promoting the story of Tanya Jessen, a Seattle woman who had lost 95 pounds playing *DDR* – "through nearly zero change in diet". By the end of that year, *DDR* was a morning show regular. Good Morning America featured it among Toys To Get Kids Off The Couch. Today interviewed Jessen and other extreme *DDR* dieters.

Fitness games weren't new. Atari created a prototype stationary bicycle interface in 1982, and physical input devices such as the LJN Roll & Rocker and Nintendo Power Glove offered more 'active' ways to play NES titles later that decade. But they had never been popular, not in the way *DDR* inaugurated.

Suddenly, middle-aged women started buying PlayStations expressly to play *DDR* as a home workout, much like young men might buy a console solely for *Madden* or *FIFA*. The promise of these fitness games continued through the mid-'00s, first with EyeToy games such as *AntiGrav*; then with Wii and its physical Remotes; then with *Wii Fit* and Wii's Balance Board, a device explicitly sold as an exercise tool; and finally with Sony and Microsoft's Wii-alikes, PS Move and Kinect.

The trend didn't last. For one part, it's because all fitness crazes are fleeting. Just consider the Jazzercise tapes or step aerobics platforms or Bowflex machines stuffed into our attics. But for another part, physical videogames were never really compatible with ordinary homes. The average den is neither sufficiently large nor configurable enough for simulated dancing or sports. Early versions of Kinect required absurdly large distances between sensor and player. Gamers might move furniture temporarily, but once the novelty wears off, decades of interior design habits return the living room to its familiar, passive state. In fairness, the same was true of Jazzercise videos: after a spurt of initial interest, we moved our coffee tables back into position and tuned in to Wheel Of Fortune.



Illustration marshdavies.com

With Xbox One and Kinect 2, the era of physical interfaces for fitness and active play has come to a definitive close

With Wii, Nintendo had adopted the industrial design of the TV remote because of its familiarity. In so doing, it forgot that the remote's greatest power lies in its facility for sloth. With Wii U, Nintendo has largely given up on the Wii Remote, relegating it to party game curiosities like *Just Dance*, or reverting it into an NES-style controller for *Super Mario 3D World* and its ilk.

But with Xbox One and its pack-in Kinect 2 accessory, the era of physical interfaces for fitness and active play has now come to a definitive close. Kinect 2's purpose is precisely the opposite of its predecessor. It's an inactivity support system.

When you first set up your Xbox One, it encourages you to connect the optional Kinect 2, sweetening the deal by explaining that it will allow you to operate the console "without putting down your sandwich". Inaction only becomes more pressing from here. "To engage, lift your hand," reads a tutorial. Once identified, the hand becomes a cursor, like a Wii Remote minus the minimal exertion required to hold one aloft. Voice commands such as "Xbox on" even obsolesce the need to press a controller button to begin gaming (even though a button must still be actuated to power on the controller).

Apart from using facial recognition for signing multiple users into different Xbox Live accounts, little about Kinect 2's behaviours really makes things easier. Selecting a menu by voice, logging into a service, launching an app: these practices become incrementally less laborious – compared to the already nominal activity of piloting a cursor around a screen to select an object with a button. Such a fact is noteworthy: the decade-long experiment in physical gaming has culminated in a 'next generation' of total corporeal reprieve. Save your button-pressing vigour for *Titanfall*, a game you'll still need to put down your sandwich to play. At least for now.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

On the third day of every month, the same tweet appears in the @edgeonline mentions feed. It's part of a fan campaign calling on Sega to give Yu Suzuki the *Shenmue* licence so he can complete the trilogy. Relying on a four-year-old Famitsu story in which a Sega rep said a new *Shenmue* could only happen if a platform holder funded its development in exchange for an exclusivity deal, scores of fans take to social media to try to make it happen.

Sega is just about the most risk-averse publisher in the world at the moment, so it's in no hurry to finish off a trilogy whose first two entries were so unprofitable. Suzuki now says he's looking at using Kickstarter, but a platform whose most successful project raised $10.2 million is not going to fund the game that exists in the minds of Suzuki and his Twitter army, and he'd be a fool to try to make it without the appropriate resources.

That's because we've seen all too recently what happens on social media when a game fails to meet expectations. First came *Watch Dogs*, whose post-delay reappearance saw it clearly scaled back from its E3 2012 unveiling. Then *Dark Souls II* shipped on 360 and PS3 without the new lighting system shown in early media. The outrage was surprising, huge and largely misinformed. Forum threads ran into hundreds of pages, posts typed onto spittle-flecked keyboards, based on a single GIF of (admittedly damning) *Watch Dogs* footage. Side-by-side shots of *Dark Souls II* compared the same scene in the retail game to an early demo, but only in the latter was the protagonist holding a torch, which is the most potent light source in the game. Ambient lighting and texture quality had clearly been cut back, but the tone of the debate was coloured by misconceptions.

The biggest problem with talking about games on the Internet is you're in an enormous room that's teeming with people, all of whom are only there to be heard. As such, it's those who hold the most extreme opinion, and shout it the loudest, that stand out. It's why forums can be so poisonous, and clickbait op-eds still exist. So while Team Yu, as Suzuki's campaigners call themselves, are using social media in an attempt to effect positive change, those upset by *Dark Souls II*'s downgrade took to Twitter not to ask for an explanation, but to demand one. The hashtag of choice was #YouLied, which says much about the direction the debate took. Such is the level of mistrust that players feel towards publishers that both Namco Bandai and Ubisoft were accused of having deliberately deceived the world by showing off a game they knew would never see the light of day.



Illustration marshdavies.com

Publishers need to realise that visual and technical standards are as important to marketing plans as preorder bonuses

That's nonsense, of course. No company in its right mind would sanction the creation of a graphically intensive demo it had no intention of shipping. To do so would mean spending tens of thousands of dollars on duping your audience into preordering a lemon, and forever damaging your standing.

FromSoftware makes fantastic games, but it is not known for its technical ability. Chances are that a few sliders had to be turned down late in the day to avoid *Dark Souls II* feeling like a 50-hour trudge through Blighttown. *Watch Dogs*, meanwhile, was announced months before PS4 and Xbox One's specs were finalised. It was a realtime demo made possible by the same engine that powers the final game. It is a game of many complex systems and, as Ubisoft Montreal made clear in last month's cover story, those systems weren't playing well together. Surely it's far better to dial down weather effects and the odd bridge texture than it is to start stripping out gameplay elements?

Yet the old maxim that 'gameplay is king' doesn't ring so true these days. At the start of a generation, we expect games to vindicate early adopters. But similarly, the final games on old hardware often wring a generation's best-looking worlds from it, so perhaps FromSoftware really should have done better.

Both sides need to change, though. Players should understand that the target demo is the new target render, and that there will never again be something so obviously divorced from release-day reality as the *Killzone 2* trailer at E3 2005. Publishers need to realise that visual and technical standards are as important a part of the marketing plan as preorder bonuses. And it'd be great if online communities took a leaf out of Team Yu's book, using social media's direct line between themselves and creators in order to change things for the better. After all, no one will benefit if developers spend the new generation afraid to reach for the skies.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s games editor, and is in the process of coming to terms with the concept of bylines*

#266

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Economies of scale

The physics playground on offer to Early Access backers of *Next Car Game* (p52) is slight, but there's a pleasant metagame beneath its unstructured destruction. Soar into the air and a single keypress unhooks the game camera, giving you a few precious seconds in which to position it just so and snap the perfect screenshot before you slam back down to terra firma and watch your meticulously modelled vehicle shatter into tiny pieces.

Driving games are one of few genres that give players freedom over how the action is presented. Sim purists can position the camera behind the dashboard interior or on the bonnet, while those weaned on the arcade racer can fix it above and behind the car to give a wider view of the track. This simply doesn't happen in action games, where the developer sets the scale and demands that players live with it. When *Resident Evil 6* was patched to let players tweak its field of vision, it made headlines.

With *Below* (p40), Capybara is making the kind of game normally viewed from over the protagonist's shoulders, the camera slightly above and behind the action, like an arcade racer with the Ferrari replaced by a falchion. The Toronto studio's new game is built on a combat system that requires a slow, precise approach, and that punishes mistakes heavily. Yet its camera is fixed high in the sky, its protagonist a speck on the screen.

There are clear artistic and atmospheric benefits to Capy's chosen scale, but it risks making the same mistake as *Resident Evil 6*, albeit from the opposite extreme: giving players a widescreen view of proceedings but at the same time starving them of the up-close clarity that action games inherently require. It's essential that players see what they did wrong and what hit them, since it's an integral part of the learning process and very much part of the fun. After all, were *Next Car Game*'s wanton destruction viewed through *Super Sprint*'s perspective, it would, to put it mildly, lose its shine.

MOST WANTED

Mafia III PC, PS4, Xbox One
A casting call to voice three Louisiana-born brothers has propelled *Mafia III* to the upper reaches of our wishlist. Given *Mafia II*'s barren sprawl, here's hoping 2K puts new-gen processing power to good use and packs New Orleans with things to see and do.

Costume Quest 2 PC, consoles
Double Fine's first numbered sequel has been confirmed for a Halloween release, and Midnight City is also bringing *Gone Home* to consoles. The studio may not like to repeat itself, but we'll take more gentle exploration, stress-free battling and whimsical good humour in a heartbeat.

This War Of Mine PC
Warzones are familiar territory for players, but 11 Bit Studios' intriguing game offers fresh perspective. Controlling a group of civilians rather than a heavily armed soldier, you must scavenge by night and maintain your base by day, avoiding snipers and other threats.



BELOW

Capy's mysterious Xbox One adventure emerges from the shadows

Publisher	Capybara Games
Developer	In-house
Format	PC, Xbox One
Origin	Canada
Release	TBC

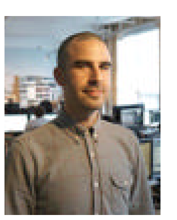
Microsoft, dogged by bad press and with a self-publishing initiative to promote, might have liked you to know a bit more about *Below* by now. You sense the Xbox One maker could have done with Capybara Games being more vocal about its mysterious new adventure, which has been confined almost entirely to the shadows since it was unveiled on Microsoft's stage at E3 2013. This shroud of secrecy suits the game's theme, but it has other, more practical advantages, as Capy co-founder and president **Nathan Vella** explains.

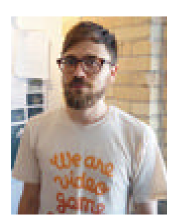
"It's given us the chance to focus directly on the game," he says, "to not have to spend tons of time building it up for demos, for promotion, then paring it down immediately [and] starting all over again. Promotion, marketing, PR: they take a lot of time away from actually making the game. So having these last nine months or so to really work on the game has meant that it's come a long way since we first showed anything."

The intriguing concept shown at E3 has become a complex web of interlocking systems. Perhaps most complex of all is a procedural algorithm that will generate single-screen environments packed with flora, fauna, enemies and traps. The entire game isn't procedurally generated – there will be a story of sorts, and Capy-designed hubs – but all of the game's systems depend on that algorithm being just right.

"*Below* is definitely the biggest, and I guess conceptually hardest, videogame that we've made," creative director **Kris Piotrowski** says. "The procedural element does have an aspect to it where, the moment you lock that stuff down, all of a sudden a gigantic chunk of the game just works. We've been working primarily on that, making sure that every single level that's generated is interesting to explore, and has a variety of different things to think about."

Demanding a thoughtful approach is a conceit around which all of *Below*'s systems have been designed. While your adventurer is a nimble thing – with a dash, a dodge, a one-button melee moveset tweaked with the left analogue stick, a bow and shield aimed with the right stick, and a two-handed weapon on your back – combat is slow paced. Stamina is limited, health doesn't recharge, and enemies hit so hard that you're rarely more than one mistake from death. It's all very *Dark Souls*, a game whose combat system Piotrowski admits the team has looked at closely, and whose predecessor, *Demon's Souls*, "bummed me out for about two months" when he realised someone else had made the game he'd been designing in his head. ▶





From top: Nathan Vella, Capy's president; Kris Piotrowski, creative director



Lighting will play a key role in *Below*, with Piotrowski singling it out as one of the elements used to make the game's combat encounters readable from a sofa away

As if to compensate for that, Capy is adding another punishing layer to *Below*'s combat: a survival system. Get hit and you begin to bleed, and can only patch yourself up by getting to safety and using items you've found out in the world. Take multiple hits and you'll bleed out even faster. "That's kind of the ebb and flow of the game," Piotrowski says. "You enter into a combat situation, you do your best to navigate through it, and if you get nicked on the way, you have to retreat and dip into the survival system. Part of the game flow is preparing yourself for harder areas." The result is a game in which even the smallest creatures demand your respect. Mercifully, not all the wildlife in *Below*'s ecosystem will set upon you on sight, but the procedural system is likely to throw up the odd surprise even in a screenful of placid creatures, such as a poison-spitting snake hidden in the tall grass.

"Microsoft catches a lot of shit – some deserved, some not – but understands our goals"

And if you fall to your death, you're gone for good. You'll respawn, but as a different person, and while you can pick up your old adventurer's backpack, there's no guarantee it will be full by the time you arrive. Some items will be perishable, and Capy is experimenting with a system that will see bodies turn to dust over time. Any progress made in the world is persistent – an unlocked door stays that way, for instance – but if you die while holding a quest item, you'll have to make it back to your predecessor's corpse to retrieve it.

This makes item management all the more crucial: your backpack can only hold so much gear, and you'll need to carefully select its contents to ensure you're prepared for the journey ahead. You'll start with a sword and shield, but when you find more gear, you're presented with a stark choice: you can only pick it up if you drop what's in your hand.

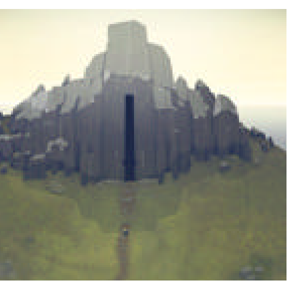
"It drastically changes your approach to combat, that single choice," Vella says. "With the *Diablo*s and the *Torchlight*s, I can decide halfway through a battle that I want to change my entire equipment setup. In *Below*, you're going to have to decide what style of play you want, and if you decide to drop one item for another, it's going to have a ginormous impact on how you play the game."

If there's a concern, it's how a combat system of such intricacy is going to work at Capy's chosen scale. Your character is a tiny presence onscreen, after all, and the camera never zooms in. The artistic benefits are obvious, reinforcing the sense of being a lone adventurer in a vast, hostile world, and meaning that huge, procedurally generated environments can fit on a single screen. But can you really design the sort of combat system normally experienced from over a shoulder to be viewed from so far away?

"It's been one of the biggest challenges as far as combat goes," Piotrowski admits. "It's one of the main things we consider when we're working on new monsters, wildlife or traps – it's always about clarity from sitting on a couch. A lot of it has to do with treating the enemies in an almost iconic sort of way, rather than focusing on creature details. It's more about the flow of the animation, the silhouettes. Everything the creatures do is telegraphed pretty clearly."

Below is a project with plenty of challenges – no surprise, given Capy seems to set out to do something totally different with each new game. Yet what might seem to be the biggest of all, working with Microsoft, has been anything but. Indeed, the platform holder sanctioned *Below*'s shift from Microsoft Game Studios to the ID@Xbox initiative, letting Capy not only self-publish the game but also freeing the studio up to bring it to other platforms, such as Steam. Vella thinks it says much about Microsoft's attitude.

"Microsoft catches a lot of shit – some of it deserved, some not – but they understand our goals," he says. "They understand the goals of the game and of the company, instead of trying to shove us in a direction that would benefit them a little more and us a little less. [This is] the best-case scenario for both the project and the studio. It represents a positive shift in big publishers [and] companies understanding the way that independent developers develop games." ■





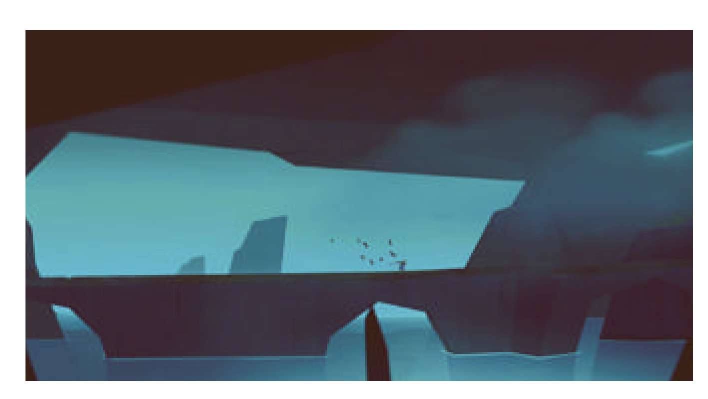
While dungeons and combat arenas will be procedurally generated, Capy's aesthetic sense means the studio isn't going to completely hand the reins over to randomness



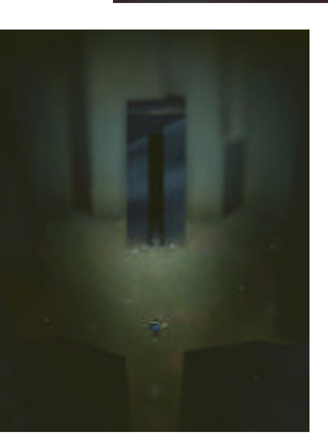
Genre bender

Sift through Capy's back catalogue and it's hard to find a common theme. "We're very conscious about not getting stuck in a hole," Vella says. "We'd done *Critter Crunch* and then *Might & Magic: Clash Of Heroes*, which are two extremely different games, but both had some kind of puzzle component. We were very conscious about that." IOS adventure *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, time-shifting sidescroller *Super Time Force* and *Below* have widened the studio's range, and Vella's particularly proud that the studio has been working on two very different projects at once. "There's no way of saying it that doesn't come off a bit cocky, which is kind of a bummer, but I don't see a lot of people making such different styles of game at the same time."

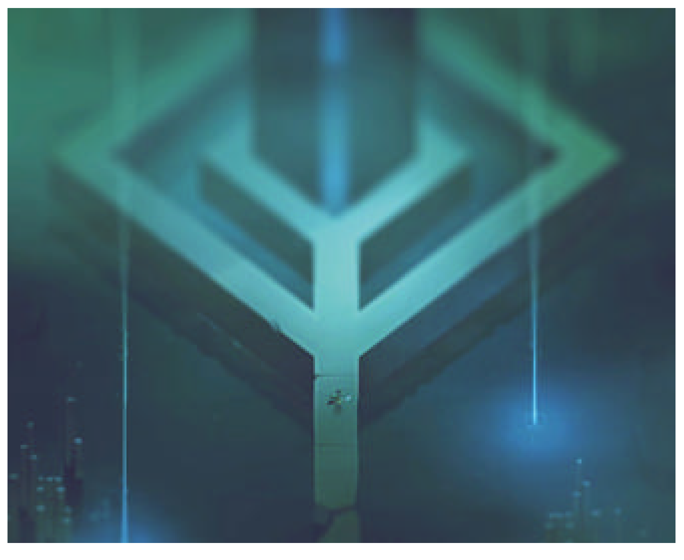
RIGHT **Despite the progress made since E3, the team is yet to give names to *Below*'s aggressors. They're known just as 'darklings' internally.** BELOW **Piotrowski says the distant camera was decided very early on. The studio wanted to "make a game that really had a different sense of space than other games, that really took advantage of HD resolution."** BOTTOM LEFT **There are common elements to Capy's games. For example, *Below* and *Superbrothers: Swords & Sworcery EP* share a composer in Jim Guthrie**







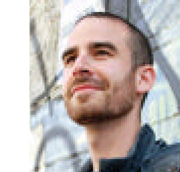
RIGHT **Heroes move quickly to cross big spaces, but Capy doesn't want you to spam your way out of trouble, and has debated its dodge's invincibility frames at length**



Q&A

Nathan Vella

Co-founder and president, Capy



Why have you shifted *Below* to ID@Xbox?
Because we were self-funding it, we were driving development ourselves – it fits almost [perfectly] into what ID@Xbox's platform goals are. If Microsoft had ID@Xbox when we started the project, it would have been kind of different for us. We wanted to self-publish, we wanted to hit other platforms at a certain point, and we're not going to sign up for some massive amount of exclusivity, because that doesn't fit the way we do things.

You had early access to Xbox One and its tools. What it's like to work with?
We've had a really good experience working with it. We decided to put [XBLA game] *Super Time Force* onto Xbox One, and the process of getting it over was relatively clean and straightforward. We're not pushing any massive tech boundaries; I'm not saying *Below* isn't a really challenging technical product – there's a ton of crazy tech going on there – but we're not building *Crysis 3*. Our goal is to leverage the technology to make really aesthetically focused, stylised and stylish stuff. The chances of us running into massive technical hurdles are probably significantly lower than the Respawns and Cryteks of the world. For us, it's a great little box. We're at a point where we can actually get stuff done and running on it with relative ease.

Microsoft takes a lot of flak for the way it treats indie devs in particular. Is that fair?
Sure, there's been some bumps, but I think that's a big sign of a positive relationship – you can hit those bumps, get over them and continue moving forward in a way that's mutually beneficial. Everyone from Phil Spencer to [Chris] Charla to Ted Woolsey, they've always been very upfront about them caring about the studio, not just pushing the project we signed a deal for.

What resolution and framerate are you targeting for the finished game?
Right now, it's running at 1080p. We're still early enough in development that the framerate isn't set, but we're going to try to hit 60fps, and it seems like that is possible. It's 1080p and significantly above 30fps, and we haven't spent tons of time in optimisation… It's very important for the game to be 1080p – the scale and size of the whole game world really shines at that resolution.



HYPE

YAKUZA: ISHIN

Yakuza's latest spinoff is historical in both content and execution

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Yakuza Studio
Format	PS3, PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	Out now (JP)



Main series characters (and their regular voice actors) play period roles. Haruka Sawamura plays an innkeeper who becomes a close confidante to Kazuma Kiryu's Ryoma Sakomoto

Yakuza Studio head **Toshihiro Nagoshi** warned us at last year's Tokyo Game Show that *Ryu Ga Gotoku: Ishin*, the latest period drama spinoff from what western players know as the *Yakuza* series, would take little advantage of Sony's new console because it was being made for PS3 as well. "PS4 is cheaper than hardware used to be," he told us, "but it's still not cheap, so I decided we'd be letting our fans down if we didn't also release a PS3 version."

It shows. On PS4, *Ishin*'s prerendered environments and slightly wooden character animations mean it looks like a high-end PS3 game, so it's hardly a showcase for the console with which it shared a Japanese launch date. 'Ishin', meanwhile, means 'reformation' or 'revolution', but a flatly literal translation could be misleading. What the subtitle wants to invoke is the Meiji Restoration period of Japanese political history, which began in early 1868. The game doesn't take place during the restoration itself, but it's set in the period leading up to it, culminating the moment the baton is passed from a generation raised in hardship to one raised in prosperity.

That serves as a metaphor for *Ishin* as a whole, since it seems that Nagoshi and company are reluctant to let go of the old ways. PS4's Share button features, considered an invaluable word-of-mouth marketing tool by most developers and a key feature for early adopters, are available in only a few specific parts of the game. DualShock 4's touchpad offers map functionality, Remote Play with Vita works smoothly, and there's a companion app for on-the-go brawling (see 'Data ronin'). It's a scant upgrade, though, especially given *Ishin*'s reams of unvoiced text, tutorials that tell rather than show, load screens between areas – albeit brief ones – and clunky manual save system, all of which are jarring presences in a game running on hardware that still smells of its packing materials.

Of course, Nagoshi knows that the new generation is not where the bulk of his audience is, as evidenced by Media Create's first-weekend figures, with sales on PS3 comfortably outstripping those of the PS4 version. The *Yakuza* games are mainstream blockbusters in Japan, and their key merits – engaging drama, beautifully rendered and acted cutscenes, gritty art direction, and a deceptively simple combat system – are all designed with a large audience in mind. In Japan, such an audience does not yet exist on PS4. Making the likes of *Ishin* exclusive to the new platform might help create one, but clearly the bottom line has taken priority.

The story follows Ryoma Sakamoto, a merchant samurai who trained in Edo under ▶

TOP RIGHT **Heisuke Todo, played here by Shigeki Baba, was a Shinsengumi captain and a practitioner of Hokushin Itto-ryu, a graceful swordplay technique that combines defence and offence into a single thrust.** BOTTOM LEFT **While Takechi Hanpeita begins the game as Ryoma Sakamoto's close friend, his plan to expel the shogunate and restore power to the Emperor results in tragedy, and the two go their separate ways. The real-life samurai's life ended in seppuku (suicide).** BOTTOM RIGHT **Isami Kondo led the Shinsengumi and, like Hanpeita, isn't portrayed here by a *Yakuza* regular. History records that he was executed on the charge of Sakamoto's murder**



Toshihiro Nagoshi, chief creative officer, Sega







Although the PS4 version is not greatly enhanced over PS3 visually, *Ishin*'s cutscenes are as effective as ever, thanks to Yakuza Studio's detailed character art and expressive facial animation



Series madman Goro Majima plays Soji Okita of Kyoto's Shinsengumi, a police force tasked with protecting the shogunate. He first appears in chapter three of *Ishin*, in which Sakamoto seeks to infiltrate the Shinsengumi

master swordsman Sadakichi Chiba and went on to become a lynchpin in the restoration of power from the military shogunates to the Emperor just as Japan was facing imposed westernisation at the hands of Commodore Perry's 'black ships'. Sakamoto's way with diplomacy, and staunch moral values, helped shape the Japan we know today, ushering in the Meiji Restoration and an end to nearly 300 years of insular shogunate rule. During this period, guidelines for government were laid down that remain in place to this day. For his efforts, Sakamoto was murdered by an unknown assailant in December 1867, weeks before the Restoration kicked off in earnest.

Nagoshi's Yakuza Studio breathes life into the story with all the surplus of charm we've come to expect from the series. Characters from the main *Yakuza* games are cast as historical heroes, with Kazuma Kiryu naturally playing the role of Sakamoto, and appearances from stalwarts such as Shun Akiyama, Goro Majima and Haruka Sawamura. After the first chapter sets the scene – Sakamoto returns to Tosa after ten years in Edo, quickly becomes embroiled in a plot to overthrow the shogunate, but is framed for a murder much closer to home that forces him to flee in disgrace – we then relocate to a bustling, 19th-century Kyoto.

The mise-en-scène is remarkable, but make no mistake: this is traditional *Yakuza* fare, albeit with a historical twist. Sidequests – or Sub Stories, in *Yakuza* parlance – reveal unseen sides of Sakamoto's personality or add further historical colour, such as the sarcastic chants of "Ee ja nai ka!" ("Who cares!") that were common to protests in that era. Play Spots this time include a variety of period card games, as well as fishing, chicken-racing and karaoke, the latter still a clumsy but amusing rhythm game despite the leap to new hardware. Real-world discount store and series staple Don Quijote appears, too.

One of *Yakuza 4*'s greatest successes was its four fighting styles, one for each of its protagonists. There's a nod to that here, despite the single playable character, with Sakamoto able to switch between four distinct approaches using the D-pad. There's the classic bare-knuckle brawling, swordplay, an old-fashioned pistol, and a combination of katana and gun. Combat itself is as welcoming and undemanding as ever, with button-mashing a perfectly valid strategy and the option to switch temporarily to easy mode after repeatedly failing the same fight. But precision play is rewarded. Learning combos results in a higher hit counter and splatters the screen with blood. Encounters are as violent they always are, but in keeping with Nagoshi's policy of not promoting wanton murder, defeated opponents usually get up and leg it (after a couple of lines of dialogue in which they realise the error of their ways and resolve to live better lives) or stick around for a lengthy cutscene. The fights that pepper the first few chapters of the main story also continue a tradition of spectacle. One, for instance, takes place in a bathhouse, with Sakamoto and his opponent both naked, their modesty protected only by clouds of steam.



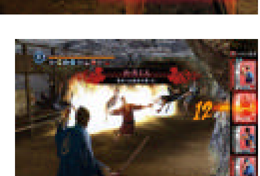
One fight takes place in a bathhouse, with Sakamoto and his opponent both naked

As we go to press, there is no official word on a western release of *Yakuza: Ishin*, but it would seem unwise to hold your breath. Localisation of 2012's *Yakuza 5* has been rumoured for some time, and despite being a longed-for addition to PS4's slender software library, a historical epic such as *Ishin* would seem an even tougher sell than the main series' modern-day setting. Given publisher Sega's ongoing risk aversion, it seems that *Ishin*, like PS3 samurai spinoff *Yakuza Kenzan*, will only ever be sold in the east. And with its reliance on old-fashioned kanji and thick Kansai dialect, you'll need a more-than-adequate grasp of Japanese to make it worth importing. But just as Ryoma Sakamoto helped lay the groundwork for Japan to trade on its own terms with the west all those years ago, it would be satisfying to see this bold and thoroughly eastern tale make the journey overseas. Better still would be for the next *Yakuza* game to be built from the ground up for PS4, free of the all-too-obvious shackles of old console hardware. ■



Data ronin

A companion app for Vita shares save data (transferred manually via PSN) with the PS4 and PS3 versions of *Ishin*, and allows players to grind on the go. Battle Dungeon serves up waves of enemies to eviscerate for XP, with skills and items carried back and forth from the main game, while other modes offer vegetable farming and gambling minigames such as mahjong and shogi. The Vita app is also playable without purchasing the main game. Importers beware: the app is only available from the Japanese PSN Store, and the main game must be registered to the same account if you want to transfer data.





ABOVE Some NPCs come with a Kizuna gauge, a buzzword forged in the aftermath of 2011's tsunami that means 'bond'. Strengthen ties with these characters through fetch quests and you'll earn points as well as items. MAIN The combat system grows ever deeper as you level up and unlock new combos. It looks suitably stylish, too – and blood certainly isn't in short supply

TOP LEFT A karaoke minigame set in a Kyoto bar comes complete with enka songs, and takes the form of a rudimentary rhythm game. RIGHT In the absence of the golfing ranges and Sega arcades of the modern-day games, pastimes such as fishing, chicken-racing and shogi serve as distractions





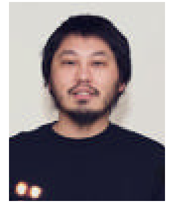


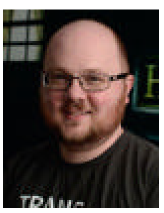
H Y P E

MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT

Airtight's noir detective story is playing the dead card with a vengeance

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Airtight Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release June 3 (US), 6 (EU)





FROM TOP **Square Enix's Yosuke Shiokawa, creative director; Airtight Games' Eric Struder, senior game design producer**

Square Enix's **Yosuke Shiokawa**, director of *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, approached Airtight Games with his latest idea after a period of great consideration. It began when he was watching Die Hard and an unbidden muse struck. What if John McClane had died right at the start of the movie? What if he became a ghost? What if a character with such strong convictions had his problem-solving skills, or at least the ones involving bullets, ripped away? Shiokawa thought it was unlikely he would simply give up. McClane would somehow carry on, doing everything in his power to win the day. A story began forming itself in his mind, a Hollywood-style detective thriller driven not by violence but by making connections, a cerebral game with a driving narrative impetus. Shiokawa wanted a western developer to work on this with him. And so the idea was put to Airtight.

"We're very much his clients," **Eric Struder**, *Murdered*'s senior game design producer, tells us. "We're very much trying to make the game that he wants to make. He has an idea of the systems that he wants to see and the story that he wants to tell. He sends that to us and we iterate on that."

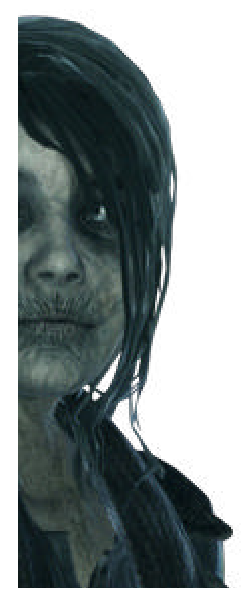
Why Airtight, a studio that missed the mark with *Dark Void* and its Nathan Drake-wannabe protagonist Will Grey? Well, with *Quantum Conundrum* (helmed by *Portal* co-designer Kim Swift) the studio proved itself eminently capable of constructing large-scale physics puzzles that were grounded firmly in logic and tantalisingly playful in their execution. This was exactly what Shiokawa needed to fill out his macabre story.

"Obviously, the story came first," Struder says. "Shiokawa had a direction he wanted to take with it. The story informed the type of gameplay encounters we wanted. In turn, those mechanics reinforced and supported the story, and it allowed us to go in twists and turns as we learned about the world and how Ronan interacts with it."

With his 40-a-day drawl, Ronan O'Connor embodies the noirish detective stereotype, but Shiokawa has given his protagonist hints of hidden layers. Here's a man who has grown up on the streets; who has fought, robbed and possibly killed; and who has almost certainly done time. In life, O'Connor was the kind of cop liable to rough up perps and sweep coffee cups off interrogation tables. When we first lay eyes on him, however, he's already plummeting to his death, having been pushed out of a fourth-storey apartment window onto the asphalt of a Salem, Massachusetts side street.

O'Connor doesn't pass over fully, instead entering an ethereal, parallel version of Salem called Dusk. Here, he must somehow piece ▶

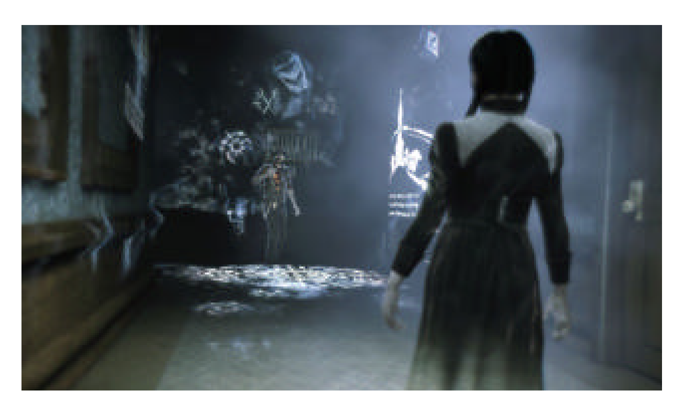
BELOW **At one point, we discover a child cowering from a spirit haunting her bedroom. We find the guy, a gangster with a grudge, hiding in the wardrobe. You'll encounter several spirits throughout the game, many of which are in need of information and your help**





ABOVE **Your initial guide to the Dusk has her own story to tell. We're given some early hints by observing doodles that she's scrawled about the world. Collectible documents littered around Salem promise to offer further insight as well.**
LEFT **When it's not throwing word puzzles your way, *Murdered* manages to hit expositional story beats at a reasonable pace. O'Connor's brother is only onscreen for a few brief seconds, but his mixed reaction to seeing our corpse is well conveyed**









Witch hunt

The choice of Salem, Massachusetts is very intentional for this procedural. "In the US, a majority of our ghost lore tends to take place in the northeast," Struder says. "Stephen King writes specifically about Maine. HP Lovecraft was centred predominantly in the northeast as well, [so] going into that region of the country made sense. Additionally, we wanted an old-world feel, and Salem has a rich [history]. Salem has a very deep background with ghost stories." The real-life Salem is most famous for being the location of the Salem Witch Trials of Arthur Miller's The Crucible, but has been largely unexplored in games.

together one last mystery: his own murder. If he's successful, he'll be reunited with his long-lost love in the afterlife.

As a ghost, O'Connor can pass through most walls freely, although the consecrated constructions of the buildings of Salem require that you initially enter through open doors or windows. We head up and into an apartment building to reach our next objective: the room from which we were thrown. On the way, we pass through an apartment in which three people playing poker. But while the ability to possess the living, see through their eyes and implant thoughts will help you reach the solutions to *Murdered*'s scripted cases, disappointingly we find we're cast here merely as an observer, and unable to engage in spectral mind games. Struder knows that watching alone won't cut it for puzzles.

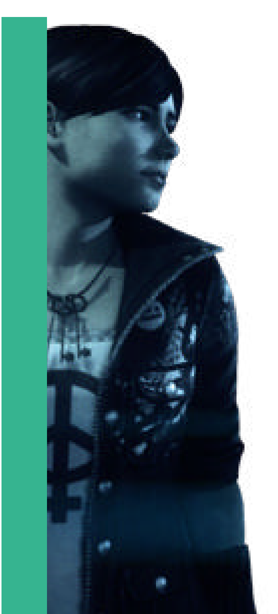
"There are a lot of different ways that we go about it," he says. "We start with, 'All right, we're at this point of the story and Ronan needs to learn this piece of information. What would be an interesting way to learn it?' You have an end goal and you work back from that. We don't want [the player] to see the answer right away. We want them to walk along to that conclusion and then discover the piece of the story that we want them to know."

When we do resume our investigations, however, we encounter other frustrations. In the second crime scene, we need to establish the series of events that led up to O'Connor's demise. We search the apartment, revealing evidence and occasionally assigning floating words to it from a pool of options to activate explanatory cutscenes. "What is the girl doing?" we're asked at one point, after spotting the shade of a scared-looking character by a door frame. Is she watching, frightened, ignoring, hiding, calm, fighting or interfering? This puzzle isn't quite intuitive enough, however, and we find the solution not purely through lateral thought, but also trial and error. In a story built on detective work, resorting to guesswork is jarring.

Here, O'Connor must somehow piece together one last mystery: his own murder

A later scene injects hope that this may not be indicative of *Murdered* as a whole. As we explore Salem, we come to a beach. On the sand stands a young spirit. She's crying, unsure of why she's here or how she died, so we put our detective skills to work. There are no words to pick from, leaving us free to move around the scene, absorbing the facts before us. When the puzzle is solved, she floats upwards, her spirit dissipating into the ether. It's a resonant moment, with mechanics and story working to the same end, and a welcome contrast to the preceding scene. If the rest of the game follows this path, there is scope for an affecting tale in spite of its faults. On current form, though, *Murdered* needs to do a little soul searching of its own. ■

ABOVE LEFT **O'Connor is guided through his early forays in the Dusk by a confident girl who has been trapped in this murky limbo for a while.** ABOVE **A limited stealth section sees a barely explained batch of demons suddenly show up. You can attack them from behind with instakill moves, but they're here to introduce moments of patient tension and planning among your ongoing search for evidence**





Publisher/developer Bugbear Entertainment
Format PC
Origin Finland
Release Out now (Early Access)





Car handling is reminiscent of the weighty, soft-sprung wallow that characterised the *FlatOut* games, which, while perfectly adequate when trying to slide into a wall, makes precision manoeuvres difficult

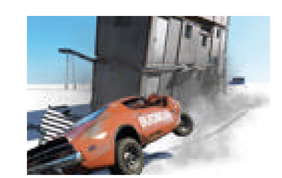
NEXT CAR GAME

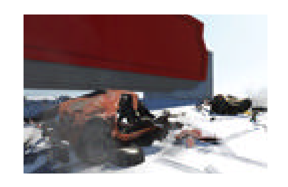
Bugbear revels in the simple pleasure of messy driving

Admit it: whenever a new *Colin McRae* or *TOCA* release presented another nuanced handling model to master, the first thing you did after putting the disc in was to drive into a wall to test how far your car's bodywork would bend. Inevitably, and disappointingly, it would only ever buckle as far as the indestructible box at the core of each vehicle. The same was true of the bangers in Bugbear's *FlatOut* series, but its latest project allows you to reduce your car to a single, shrapnel-wrapped wheel.

Next Car Game, as its placeholder name suggests, only exists as a tech demo right now, released via Steam Early Access to players willing to pay for promise. This technology sneak peek is a playground of obstacles, ramps and car-destroying mechanisms, all painted in an austere colour scheme that brings to mind *Mirror's Edge*. An undulating, *Stunt Car Racer*-style track sits next to a colossal wall of pins waiting to turn your car into a pachinko ball. Crates, tyres and portable cabins are stacked for you to hurtle into them, and a giant robotic spider stamps its feet provocatively nearby.

Car damage is remarkable. Bottom out after a badly landed jump and you'll buckle your wheels as well as the bodywork. Clatter into a concrete column and it shatters as your bonnet and bumper bend around it. Drive into a spiked mangle and you'll emerge with considerably less car than you entered with. That it's so easy to damage or wreck your car is intoxicating, but such fragility may prove frustrating in the context of a full game, and Bugbear knows there's only so often you'll want to hit reset after having found yourself unable to drive in anything but a circle.





ABOVE CENTRE ***Next Car Game*'s ageing, rust-ridden heaps are a great deal more charismatic than the shinier vehicles found in most racing games. And worsening their state is irresistible.**
ABOVE **Despite the apparent severity of this accident, we were still able to drive away from the scene, albeit listing noticeably. In the demo, you can quickly reset your car's position and damage.**
LEFT ***Next Car Game*'s weathered stock make more sense on the dusty tracks that will feature in the final game than they do in the hyper-stark stylings of the current tech demo**





Even relatively weak objects damage your car if you hit them hard enough. The amount of debris onscreen at any one time is high, although it's possible to be marooned if items get stuck underneath you



Janne Suur-Näkki, game designer

"Showing cars getting smashed up and torn apart in spectacular crashes is cool, of course," game designer **Janne Suur-Näkki** tells us. "And to really show the destruction in all its glory, you have to crank up the knobs to 11. But that then means the player will probably end the race in the first crash, [which is] not cool any more. It's been a challenge to find a sweet spot to have both spectacular crashes and a fun gaming experience without going all arcade. And to be honest, that's probably something we're going to be tweaking right until the end."

Next Car Game's environmental objects are, in a very positive sense, equally flimsy at the moment, shattering or deforming according to the direction and force of any given impact. There's an immense satisfaction to be gained from sending your car, roof first, into a collection of sheds positioned just beyond a ramp. But, as enjoyable as these elements are, they won't necessarily feature in the final game either.

"Basically, everything that we thought would make any sense is destructible," Suur-Näkki says. "That means stacks of tyres are composed of individual tyres that fly through the air when crashed into, wooden fences shatter and break down, concrete walls crumble, and trackside steel barriers bend. We've also prototyped destructible buildings and other neat things. Stuff like that will be included only if we deem it meaningful in that context. Although we love the over-the-top action our game features, we still want to maintain a certain realistic degree."

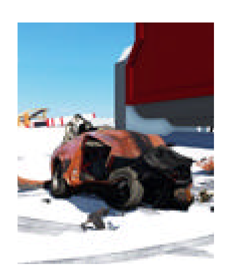
Alongside refining the UI and implementing multiplayer, Bugbear is also working on a career mode that will place a great deal of focus on spending time in the garage to maintain and upgrade your cars. You'll have to pay to repair damage using money earned from events, and the detailed car models can be stripped right down and built back up in the way you want. The team has taken inspiration from 1989's California Dreams-published *Street Rod*. "[That game] did a wonderful job of making you feel the car you worked on in your garage was something important; your personal creation," Suur-Näkki says. "We want to achieve something similar, but up to date."

At the time of writing, the game is closing in on 100,000 preorders, netting the studio $3 million – nearly three times the $350,000 Bugbear asked for in its failed *Next Car Game* Kickstarter campaign (see 'Flat tyre'). Suur-Näkki admits this far exceeds Bugbear's funding expectations, but stresses the studio never lost confidence in the game's worth.

"To show the destruction in all its glory, you have to crank up the knobs to 11"

"It takes a lot of faith, hope and love to create a great game, and of course every setback – whether that's a lack of publisher interest or an unsuccessful Kickstarter campaign – makes it harder and harder to keep your faith," he says. "When we initially started pitching *Next Car Game*, we kept hearing how there's supposedly no market for a game like ours. Apparently, our type of racing is adolescent fun [and] that doesn't make a convincing business case. Even so, we believed in the game and took it upon ourselves to show it can, and will, succeed.

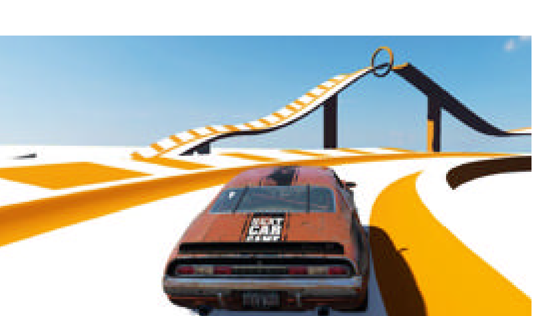
"We've always loved the *FlatOut* games, and over the years, fans have been asking us to carry on in the same spirit with a new game. With *Next Car Game*, we really wanted to get back to our roots and create another high-octane demolition racing game – for us and for the fans." ■



Flat tyre

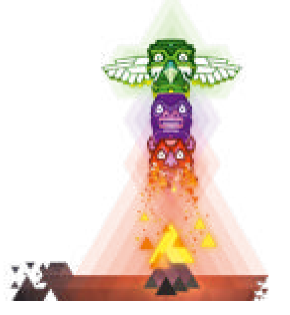
Bugbear cancelled its Kickstarter campaign when it became clear it wasn't going to reach its target before deadline. But the company doesn't regret giving it a shot. "It was a great experience and we learned a lot," says Suur-Näkki. "I think the main factor [in] our failure was that we didn't get enough exposure and failed to reach our audience. Not having a playable build didn't help us either. You really have to experience *Next Car Game* yourself to realise we mean business, and I think after word started spreading, the ball really got rolling and our Early Access campaign turned out to be a success. Lesson learned: if you have a great game that's already at a playable state, Early Access is the way to go."

After crashing our car a couple of times, we headed straight for this *Stunt Car Racer*-style track, only to find that the car's heavy handling makes it difficult to maintain any kind of speed without falling off





Publisher Microsoft
Developer Press Play
Format 360, Xbox One
Origin Denmark
Release October



TOTEM

Brotherly love abounds in Press Play's puzzle-platformer



Ole Teglbjærg, studio director at Press Play



The game initially reminded us of *Zoo Keeper*, but in play *Totem* crafts its own look

For a game conceived by two brothers, it seems fitting that *Totem* should have two playable protagonists. Bo and Asger Strandby, lead designer and game director respectively, started toying with the idea of their puzzle platformer while putting the finishing touches to *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*. Weary of bug fixing and eager to start something new, *Totem* gave them a creative outlet. But it wasn't until they showed the game to an inebriated **Ole Teglbjærg**, one of Press Play's studio directors, at a work party that it took on life as a full-time project.

"I was pretty excited about it," Teglbjærg tells us, "but I honestly didn't remember a lot of details from it when I woke up the next morning! I asked for a build to take home so I could spend more time with it. And then it became clear to me that, in its simplicity, [*Totem*] had something special to offer."

Teglbjærg shared the game with Press Play's two other directors, Mikkel Thorsted and Rune Dittmer, and all agreed that it warranted a proof of concept. The Strandbys were given a small team to develop their prototype and now the game is wending its way to Xbox One and 360.

Set on a tropical island, your goal is to recover the pieces of a totem pole that once stood in your village. Shattered by a Dark Shaman, who killed the monument's White Shaman guardian in the process, the pieces are now scattered. You retrieve them by negotiating the perilous obstacle courses that make up each level, ensuring that both of your totemic charges survive.

In the early stages each character has its own pathway, occupying either the top or the bottom of the screen, but later on these paths overlap and converge. As both characters respond to your inputs, you'll have to make use of the environment – temporarily blocking one's progress using a wall, for example – in order to line them up for jumps or to operate switches simultaneously. When they're on the same plane the pair can stand on each other's shoulders, allowing you to combine their standard double jumps for greater reach, or keep one out of the deadly colour-coded Spirit Zones.

These purple and green zones (or red and blue in co-op – see 'Twotem') form the backdrop to many of the puzzles, and only the character of matching colour can pass through them. You can swap the two characters' positions with a button press, and the game delights in setting up patterns and then second-guessing your instinct, resulting in a death that will initially have you casting for someone to blame before concluding that it's your fault (think *Limbo*'s pressure-plate-operated crushers). A couple of falling sequences require extremely quick thinking as we plummet through alternating patterns.

Your reactions will be tested elsewhere, too, with Press Play achieving a pleasing balance between puzzle solving and twitch platforming. The campaign is split into three worlds, each introducing its own special power. The first of these, and the only one revealed so far, is Gravity, which combines the basic swapping mechanic with inverted forces of attraction. Initially this is used just to switch surfaces, but we're soon having to time button presses carefully in order to stay in the air and float through deadly sections.

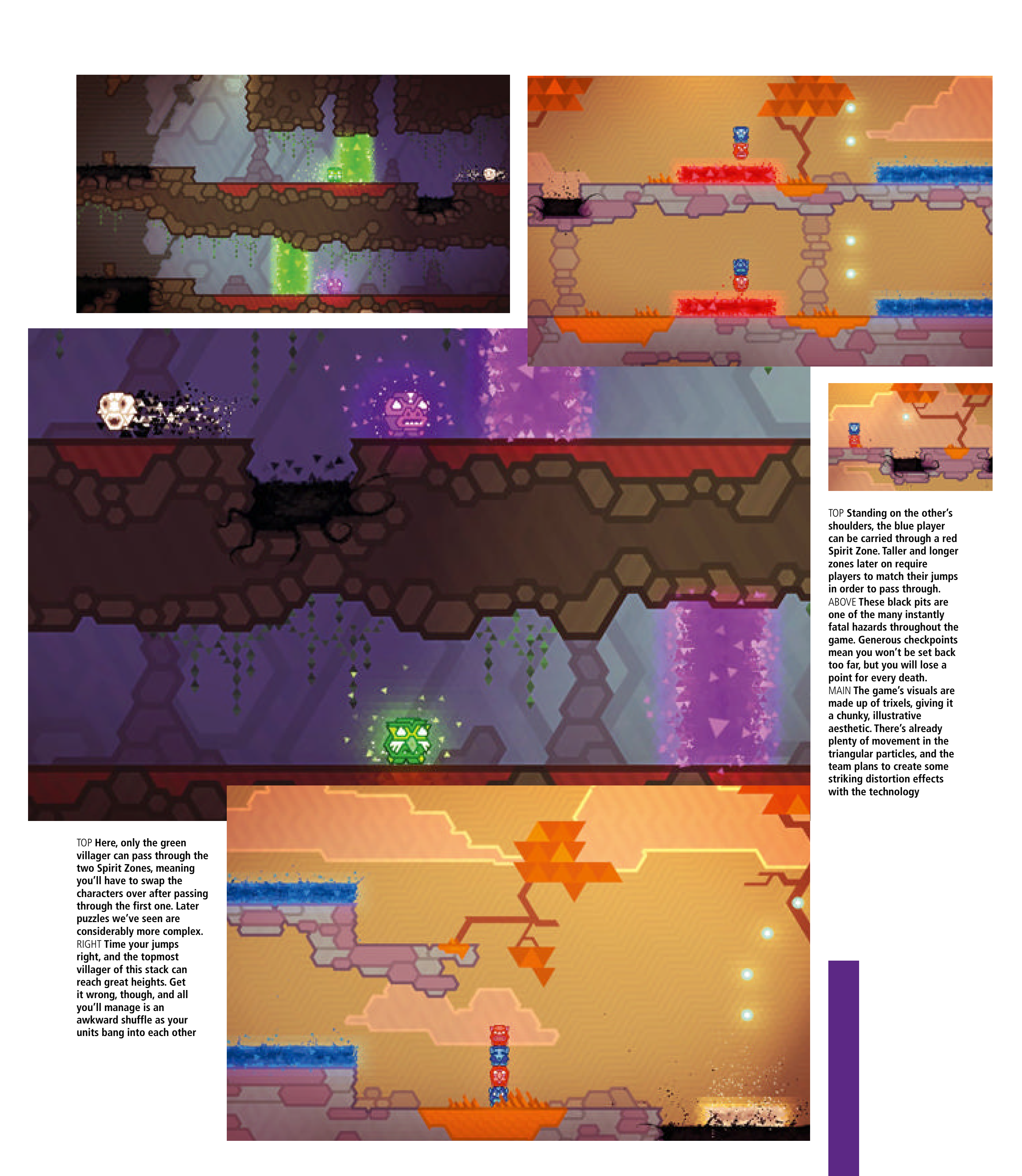
Pickups dotted about each stage decide your final score, and how many you collect will decide whether the totem piece you win at the end is an uninspiring block of wood, or a colourful face sporting accoutrements such as sunglasses or a peace pipe. You can, of course, go back and replay any level to improve your prize.

Totem is still in an early state, but the well-weighted platforming already feels satisfying and substantial, and new ideas and abilities are offered up at a fair lick. If Press Play can maintain this momentum without undermining the purity of the core idea, the odds will be stacked in *Totem*'s favour. ■



TWOTEM

Rather than simply give each player control of one of the singleplayer game's characters, the local co-op mode ups the stakes and provides two for each. One player has two blue villagers while the other has two red, all of which can be stacked in any order – assuming you can figure out how to use the levels to achieve this. The singleplayer combined quadruple jump becomes an octuple manoeuvre here, allowing you to reach greater heights. Success relies on communication between the two players, especially during perilous jumping sections, and this means each bested hurdle feels like a massive achievement. However, things can quickly disintegrate into slapstick disarray.

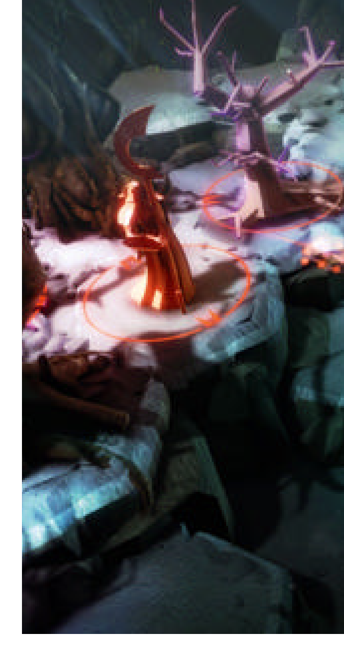


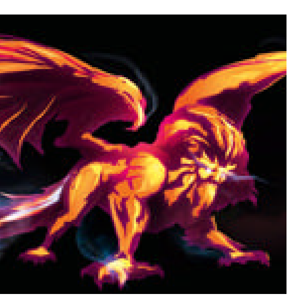
TOP Here, only the green villager can pass through the two Spirit Zones, meaning you'll have to swap the characters over after passing through the first one. Later puzzles we've seen are considerably more complex. RIGHT Time your jumps right, and the topmost villager of this stack can reach great heights. Get it wrong, though, and all you'll manage is an awkward shuffle as your units bang into each other

TOP Standing on the other's shoulders, the blue player can be carried through a red Spirit Zone. Taller and longer zones later on require players to match their jumps in order to pass through. ABOVE These black pits are one of the many instantly fatal hazards throughout the game. Generous checkpoints mean you won't be set back too far, but you will lose a point for every death. MAIN The game's visuals are made up of trixels, giving it a chunky, illustrative aesthetic. There's already plenty of movement in the triangular particles, and the team plans to create some striking distortion effects with the technology



Publisher/developer Julian Gollop
Format PC
Origin Bulgaria
Release TBC





***Chaos*'s creatures were limited to one of seven colours due to the ZX Spectrum's simple palette. *Reborn*'s beasts still have one base colour, but they're pearlescent. They're also often rendered in the hue used for their 8bit forebears**

CHAOS REBORN

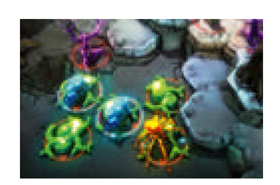
You have to see it to disbelieve it

Julian Gollop made four *Rebelstars*, two *X-COMs*, a *Ghost Recon* and an *Assassin's Creed* before considering a return to *Chaos*. Before *Chaos*'s most recent rebirth, it was a 1985 ZX Spectrum game, and before that it was a boardgame, but only a handful of British 30-somethings will recognise this as a sequel. For most, *Chaos Reborn* is new, even if its rules are 30 years old.

In *Chaos*, wizards take turns summoning creatures and launching attacks from a deck of spells. The most powerful spells have a reduced chance of being successful, but casting several weaker spells with high hit rates can shift the balance, and the battlefield, towards lawful or chaotic. This in turn increases the odds of a successful cast of spells of that type and escalates the battle. The first few rounds tend to be played out with goblins and zombies, but as the casting odds increase, dragons, vampires and giants start to come into play.

And *Chaos* becomes a poker game when you learn any creature can be cast as an illusion with a 100 per cent success rate. Illusory creatures move, attack and defend like the real thing, but can be immediately dispelled by another wizard's Disbelieve spell. The question, then, is whether you doubt your opponent's Golden Dragon enough to waste a valuable turn Disbelieving it. Get it wrong and the beast will shrug the spell off, fly halfway across the battlefield and belch fire all over your undefended wizard.

Those core rules have survived unchanged in *Reborn*. "There's a simplicity there," says Gollop, both designer and programmer here. "But with that simplicity, you've got a great deal of diversity in what can happen. Randomness is a key part of this, and I





ABOVE CENTRE ***Chaos*'s Gooey Blob is its most famous spell and even became the name of Yahoo's *Chaos* fan club in the late '90s. It used to spread exponentially across the board, swallowing all in its path, but it'll burn itself out eventually in *Reborn*.**
ABOVE **Flying creatures move quickly and make deadly mounts. Strongest of all are the dragons, which fly and have a powerful ranged attack, but their 20 per cent casting chance also makes them a risky card to play.**
LEFT **In later builds of *Reborn*, giants will gain a one-shot ranged attack, a thrown rock, that their 8bit counterparts never had**





Wizards can cast creatures to fight on their behalf, or can attack directly using spells such as Vengeance or Magic Bolt. Other defensive and offensive options include a magic sword and shield, or a magic castle to hide within



Julian Gollop, designer and programmer

wanted to keep that feeling from the original game, because it's unique. The randomness means you have to judge your risk carefully; you have to take chances when you need to and be cautious, because the situation can change suddenly from one turn to the next. It's a game that has quite a few turnarounds, even though each game is quite short."

***Reborn*'s modern updates** have made the game faster and more dynamic. Wizards and creatures are more mobile on hexes than they were on the original's square grid, and battles are now limited to a maximum of four players, not eight, with maps scaled to the player count. Victory points discourage cowardice, with successful spells and creature kills scoring points that come into play if the game lasts 20 turns, though this is rare. *Reborn* is a fast-paced strategy game made for simultaneous online play, but asynchronous play can stretch short games over days.

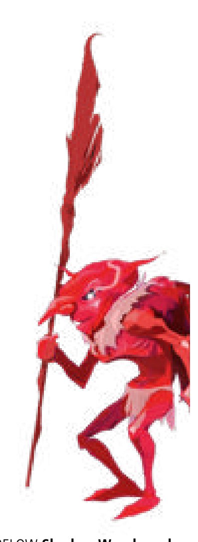
Brand new, too, is the Realms Of Chaos metagame, which links hundreds of player-vs-CPU battles across a procedurally generated, fog-shrouded landscape. As you explore, you'll confront enemy wizards, fight them, and steal new spells for your own deck. That deck can be taken into online multiplayer, and acquired knowledge shared with the rest of your wizards' guild. "*Chaos* really was just an arena battle game," Gollop says, "but I've always been a big fan of metagames. I added a metagame to *X-COM*, as you know, and I was attempting to do so for other games and failing, but it works for *Chaos*, especially with the online element. If you find certain pieces of equipment, you can share that information with your guild members.

"It sounds vague, but we're still working it out." Indeed, *Reborn*'s playable prototype has none of the metagame or online elements besides the core multiplayer mode, Classic Chaos, in which up to four wizards are assigned a random deck and sent into battle. For now, there are 43 spells – just over half the planned number – with few beasts' special abilities implemented, but already it's a competitive tussle where the manoeuvrable units are more than a match for a lucky cast and games are often won by the best player rather than the best deck.

For Gollop, *Reborn* is the sum of 30 years of learning. "There's so much," he says. "Something I'm very keen on developing is procedurally generated content. There was an element of that in *X-COM* and it's something I very much want to do with *Chaos Reborn*. We'll have randomly generated arenas, randomly generated realms [and] opponents. We'll see how far we can take it. Then there's the accessibility, or Ubisoft's definition of accessibility I learned [on *Ghost Recon* and *Assassin's Creed*], which is a combination of usability and learnability. The idea to try to keep things easy for the player to learn, and easy to get into, is quite valuable.

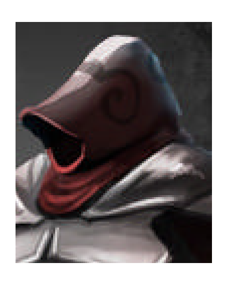
"With that simplicity, you've got a great deal of diversity in what can happen"

"And I think the other thing I learned was from working on *Laser Squad Nemesis* before going back to a big publisher... and it's that working directly with your audience is quite rewarding compared to this disconnected approach you get working either in or for a big publisher. We built *Nemesis* with a small set of features and we developed it with lots of player input, and we had players designing maps, moderating their own tournaments and more. I hope *Chaos Reborn* will develop in the same way, because when players own the game, it's a very cool way to make games." ■



BELOW Shadow Wood can be summoned to engage enemy units, populating the map with living trees. While the trees are weak, an engaged unit is immobile until the fight is over, making it the perfect delay tactic





Chaotic good

Julian Gollop returned to *Chaos* after taking paternity leave from Ubisoft Sofia and experimenting with Unity while caring for his newborn twins. Those experiments led to him quitting Ubisoft and starting work on *Chaos Reborn* in November 2012. "It felt like the natural project to try, really: my first game back as an indie being one of the first projects I created on my ZX Spectrum. At the moment only I'm working on it full time, but I've got a couple of artists and another programmer. We have an artist in Hungary, who did some of the original concepts, and an artist in Romania, who has done quite a bit of the modelling for the creatures. But the team size is small, and it will probably remain fairly small."



ROUND-UP

ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY

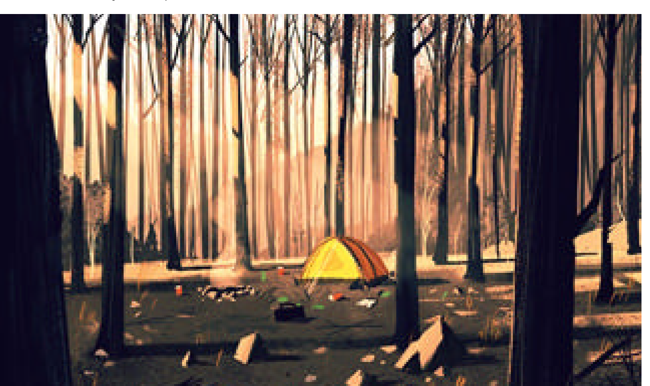
Publisher/developer Ubisoft **Formats** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014



Fan surveys have long made it known Ubisoft was considering taking *Assassin's Creed* to 19th-century France, and *Unity*, announced with striking alpha footage after some unflattering leaked screenshots rather undersold it, is proof of that long-rumoured endeavour. French Revolution-era Paris is a no-brainer for a series at its best when working in history's moral grey areas, while Notre Dame and its ilk will refocus the series on the vertical after *ACIII* and *Black Flag*'s flattened sprawl. With no PS3 or 360 versions planned, here's hoping all those eavesdropping missions have been lost in the generational transition.

FIREWATCH

Publisher/developer Campo Santo **Format** PC **Release** 2015



The involvement of Olly Moss meant Camp Santo's debut was always going to look the part, but there's much more to *Firewatch* than its artstyle. This firstperson tale of a fire lookout exploring the Wyoming wilderness will be brought to life by a writing team that worked on *The Walking Dead*, while the involvement of *Mark Of The Ninja* designer Nels Anderson suggests a mechanical leap forward from Telltale's QTE-driven adventure series.

THE FOREST

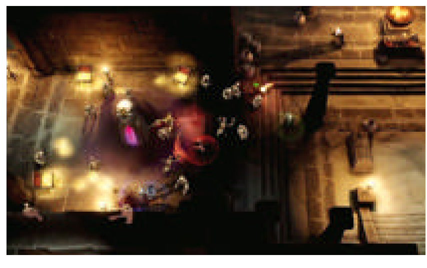
Publisher/developer Endnight Games
Format PC **Release** TBC



Endnight's Rift-supporting survival adventure is staggeringly pretty and hauntingly gruesome, with players exploring beautiful woodland teeming with bloodthirsty mutants. This is a living forest, with real weather and plants that live and die: you grow them for food and fell trees for building materials.

GAUNTLET

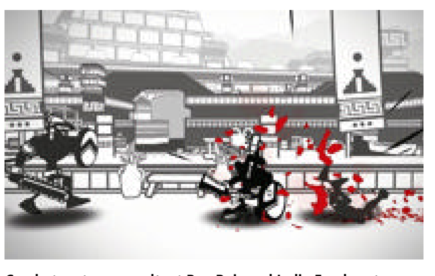
Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** Arrowhead Game Studios
Format PC **Release** 2014



We raised an eyebrow, but *Magicka* developer Arrowhead is the perfect fit for a reboot of Atari's arcade classic. After all, the Swedish studio has a track record in chaotic fourplayer games that blend ranged and melee combat. We look forward to shooting everyone's food again later this year.

AZTEZ

Publisher/developer Team Colorblind
Format PC, PS4, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One **Release** 2014



Combat system consultant Ben Ruiz and Indie Fund partner Matthew Wegner talk a good game: 2D brawler *Aztez* will, we're told, marry the best of *Bayonetta*, *Aliens Vs Predator* and *Devil May Cry*. A randomised strategy game will help break up all the blood-splattered monochromatic air combos.


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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

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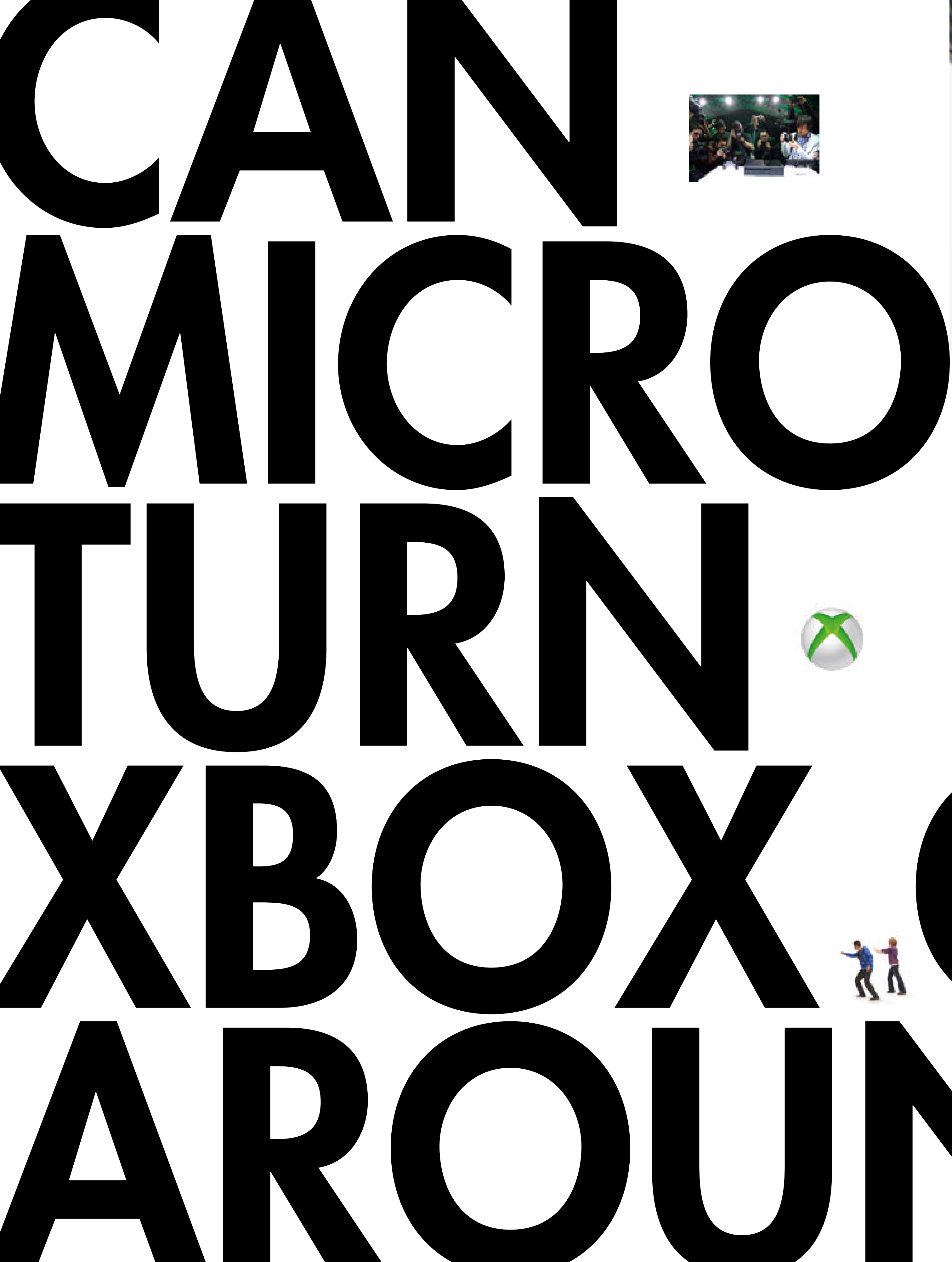
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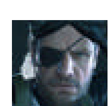


Xbox One is languishing behind PS4, a stark reversal of the previous generation. What can be done to put it back on top?

By Nathan Brown









THE PARTY, IF THERE WAS ONE AT ALL, WAS SHORTLIVED.

News that UK sales of Xbox One had surged 96 per cent in the week of *Titanfall*'s release, with seven out of every ten consoles sold alongside Respawn's multiplayer shooter, should have set champagne corks popping in Microsoft's Redmond HQ. Any suggestion that this was the turning point for Xbox One's fortunes, however, was quickly shot down by news that UK sales of PS4 had risen by 72 per cent in the same seven-day period. Yet Sony's boost was not driven by the long-awaited arrival of a platform-exclusive game release – that would come a week later, when *Infamous: Second Son* saw hardware sales more than double – but by retailers finally having enough stock to meet demand. Sony can't make its new console fast enough, while Microsoft's lies readily available on store shelves.

Microsoft knows only too well about stock shortages. It had shipped just 1.5 million 360s to retailers by the close of 2005, which was nowhere near enough to meet the rapacious Christmas demand. The supply-chain issues of 2005 gave Microsoft a much-needed bounce coming into 2014, however, with Xbox One's launch figures such that it could lay claim to being the company's most successful console of its time in the business. Yet the numbers speak for themselves. Microsoft hasn't updated us on Xbox One's sales since its financial results in late January, when it said it had sold 3.9m consoles by the end of 2013. Sony, by contrast, shouts from the rooftops about PS4's performance at retail, most recently announcing that the console had passed 6m sales in early March.

In February, US market researcher NPD Group suggested Microsoft was closing in, with Sony holding only a ten per cent advantage over its rival's hardware sales that month. But there is a big difference between closing the gap and merely slowing the rate at which it grows. That Microsoft is behind Sony in the US and UK – two markets in which it enjoyed profound leads for much of the 360/PS3 generation – says a lot about how much needs to change.

Fortunately for Microsoft, much already has. Today's Xbox One is a very different machine to the one unveiled to such opprobrium last



***Titanfall*'s release nearly doubled Xbox One sales in its first week on sale, topping charts**



May and even the one that launched in November. The more controversial corporate policies have been abandoned, the console's baffling UI has been streamlined, and its development tools have been improved. Most significantly of all, Xbox One now has *Titanfall*. Within Microsoft, there is a clear feeling that a corner has been turned.

"Xbox One's momentum is fantastic," corporate vice president **Phil Harrison** tells us. "The thing that really impressed me was not just the hardware sales, which is obviously one big number that you measure, but the engagement per user is extraordinary. We're seeing more than five hours per day average usage on Xbox Live. Not only are players buying, but they're using and really engaging with the platform, and that's a great sign for the future."



Microsoft Studios CVP Phil Spencer knows Xbox One needs to broaden its reach

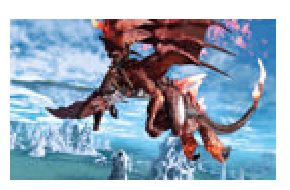
You'd expect an Xbox executive to accentuate the positive, but Harrison is right to point out that sales figures don't tell the whole story. PS4 is available in 53 countries, after all, and Xbox One in just 13. Last month, Microsoft announced the second phase of its hardware rollout, with the console to reach a further 26 territories this September. That will surely help, but there's no telling how big the gap will be by then, and it's no surprise to hear that Microsoft Studios corporate vice president **Phil Spencer** would rather things had turned out differently.

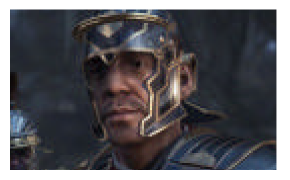
"I'll just say it: I wish we were in every country on day one," he says. "Accelerating our country rollout is really, really important to us. We built a box that natively understands the country it's in – the language and television and other things – [so] let's make sure we do a complete job in bringing the console into those markets. When we do, I think it will have an impact, but I want to do it in the right way. I don't want to get there early if the box isn't ready for the market it's being launched in."

This is the problem. Xbox One, as Microsoft's PR team likes to keep reminding us, is not just a videogame console but an "all-in-one games and entertainment system", and its core functionality means it is much more of a headache to launch internationally than Sony's games-first, player-focused alternative. The features enabled by Xbox One's HDMI In port also dictate that there is no point launching the hardware in a country where Microsoft has yet to ink deals with cable and satellite providers. The platform holder must also line up enough partnerships with local entertainment companies to ensure day-one buyers can fill up their Home screens with streaming video apps. This isn't solely an issue of handshakes and signatures on dotted lines, either – it's an engineering problem, too. A system





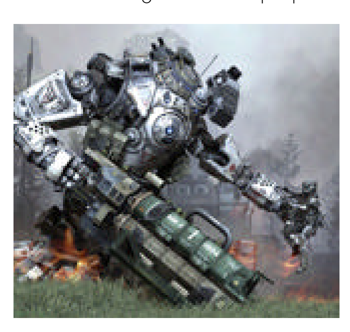




Xbox One proved to be Microsoft's most successful console launch to date, but its initial lineup felt distinctly rushed. From top: *Forza Motorsport 4*, *Crimson Dragon*, *Ryse*

designed from the ground up to be controllable by voice has to understand not only a country's native language, but also be able to parse its every regional accent.

Forget always-on DRM, the used-game ban, and all the other embarrassing PR climbdowns: the real millstone around Xbox One's neck is, and has always been, Kinect. While Microsoft's involvement in the US government's PRISM programme, which saw it hand over user data from emails and Skype to the NSA, raised concerns over its desire to put an always-on camera in living rooms the world over, Kinect's problems run far deeper than privacy paranoia. For all that Microsoft has insisted its next-generation camera peripheral is integral to Xbox One's design, the reality is that Kinect 2.0 is finicky in its gesture recognition, unreliable for voice control and still, crucially, waiting for the one game that immediately justifies its existence. Episodic Swery65 curio *D4* will not convince the masses of Kinect's worth. *Kinect Sports Rivals* may have a better chance, but it says much that we're still waiting for the camera's proof of concept as a gaming device some five months after launch, rather than having it on day one. And especially given that two launch-day games, *Crimson Dragon* and *Ryse: Son Of Rome*, were originally Kinect projects. Where are the games for the peripheral?



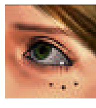
Though a much-needed boost for Xbox One, *Titanfall* isn't exclusive to Microsoft, with multiformat sequels rumoured

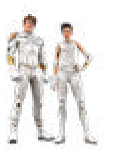
"You'll actually see quite a few more," Spencer says. "There are a number of games on the ID@Xbox programme that use Kinect, and you'll see more games in the fall. A lot of games are using Kinect and voice in a very subtle way, which I actually think is a good thing. I think subtlety, in terms of sustainable features, is better than these over-the-top [games where] you have to stand up and yell at the top of your lungs to make something happen. Go get *Dead Rising 3*, a great launch title that uses Kinect. *Ryse* used Kinect. *Forza* used Kinect. A lot of games out there use Kinect. Sometimes in very subtle ways, sometimes in more overt ways."

Kinect certainly needs to progress beyond subtle, marginal gains if it is to justify its inclusion in the box with every single Xbox One that Microsoft sends to retail shelves. A component teardown in the run-up to the console's launch put the manufacturing cost of its camera peripheral at around $75; take that out of the equation and Microsoft is no longer faced with the problem of selling a less-powerful system at a significantly higher price than its closest competitor. The console's massive UK sales increase was driven not just by *Titanfall*, after all, but also by a price cut, lowering its suggested retail price from a generally unpalatable £429 (at least next to PS4's £349) to a much more psychologically appealing £399, although bundling it with the most keenly anticipated game of the new generation to date obviously helped. There's a clear lesson here for Microsoft in both its current and future Xbox One territories, but Spencer won't be drawn on whether the company will apply what it has learned elsewhere.

"I WISH WE WERE IN EVERY COUNTRY ON DAY ONE. ACCELERATING OUR ROLLOUT IS REALLY IMPORTANT TO US"

"The UK thing was more of a specific instance around currency and other things that were going on," he says. "It's a strategy for us to be price competitive, absolutely. We want to have a box out there that people see as good value. What does it mean to be price competitive with what we're putting in the box, making sure gamers feel like they're getting good value in the box that they're buying? Being price competitive over the generation – look at what happened on 360, or frankly any console – is obviously something that we'll focus on, making sure that we're putting the best product on the shelf." ▶





THIS MAY BE A LONG GAME, BUT MICROSOFT NEEDS CHANGE QUICKLY.

And that recent rise in UK sales suggests price remains perhaps the biggest determining factor in a console's early success. Taking Kinect out of the box would certainly mean a more appealing price point for Xbox One, but it would be Microsoft's biggest admission of failure yet in a marketing campaign full of them. As such, it's little surprise to see the PR training kick in when we ask Spencer if a Kinect-free Xbox One is on the cards.

"We're always trying to match what consumers are asking for," he says. "I always want to make sure that we're in tune with what current or potential customers are asking for from us. Right now, [dropping Kinect is] not the number one request from people. Usually it's, 'Where are the great games?' That's where it usually starts, 'When am I going to get *Shenmue*?' I get a lot of people wanting old franchises to come back. But we'll always listen. I think we need to stay in tune with who our customers are, and react."

There was a time when **Peter Molyneux** would also have toed the marketing department's line, but these days, free of Microsoft's watchful eye at his indie studio 22 Cans, his tongue is rather looser. "I actually wish Kinect wasn't a requirement," he says. "It feels like an unnecessary addon to me. Maybe it's because we're in England, and it doesn't really use the TV stuff, but it feels more and more like a joke. My son and I sit there saying random things at it, and it doesn't work."

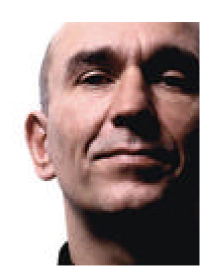
Xbox One's problems in the UK aren't limited to hit-and-miss voice recognition: at launch, its TV functions didn't support the 50Hz standard. That, like so many other things, has been addressed now, but for Molyneux the removal of that under-used camera is a no-brainer. "They could cost-reduce it [by removing Kinect]. I'm sure they're going to release an Xbox One without Kinect. It would be unthinkable that they wouldn't."

Molyneux's feelings likely hew closer to the layman's, but Spencer makes a compelling counterpoint beneath the marketing sheen. While in the run-up to launch Microsoft needed only to cater to potential customers, now it must also satisfy existing owners, none of whom will be thrilled at the prospect of Kinect being discarded and the cost of entry slashed. Only one thing unites those two groups, and it's nothing to do with TV functionality, app-snapping or media partnerships. Molyneux puts it best: "There's only one thing they need to do. Give us some good fucking games and we'll forgive every sin."



Kinect 2.0 is far from the vast improvement over the original that was promised

Unfortunately, Xbox One doesn't seem to make life easy for game creators. While the console had a bigger, and arguably better, launch lineup than PS4, the months since have served only to raise worrying concerns about the system's power, with Xbox One versions of multiplatform games consistently performing worse than their counterparts on PS4 and PC. To thirdparty studios and the people who play their games, Xbox One means lower resolutions and framerates. Microsoft may be playing a long game, but if a console cannot keep pace in the year-one sprint, what chance does it have of winning a marathon lasting a decade?

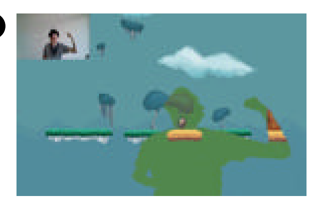


Ex-Microsoft employee Peter Molyneux foresees a Kinect-free Xbox One in the future

"Developers in the early years of any console generation are working hard on a platform that's emerging as they're trying to ship their game," Spencer notes. "Over the lifecycle of the generation, you'll see people getting closer to the metal, understanding exactly how the content and the pipeline works, what the consoles are capable of. And I'm confident that the resolution and fidelity of things that people will be playing on Xbox One will be top notch."

Fair enough, but it's early days for PS4, too, and Sony's console has already earned the perception of being the better system on which to play multiformat releases. That disparity, it seems, is not only due to PS4's more powerful innards, but the quality of its tools and SDK, which have clearly benefited from the dev-friendly, new-look Sony. A recent update to the Xbox One SDK has helped, but Spencer speaks of development tools evolving as Microsoft works out what studios need from them. "You ship with a certain idea about what the profile of a game running on your box will look like," he says, "but you learn in terms of what people are really doing, and how you can make it most effective for developers." This might be the most telling indicator of why the gulf in performance between the two consoles exists: Microsoft is relying on having conversations that Sony has already had. If multiplatform performance parity is out of reach for the time being, Microsoft only has one option if it is to bolster Xbox One's software catalogue. Luckily, it's something it's always been very good at. ▶

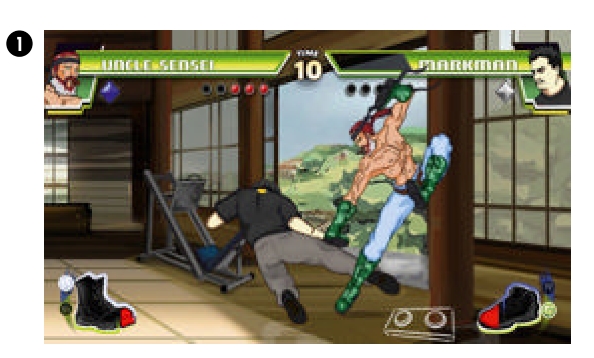
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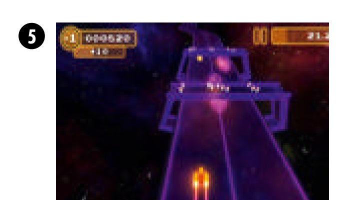
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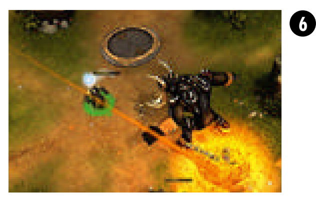
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STRIKE FORCE ONE

The first wave of ID@ Xbox games is coming. Here are ten of the highest-profile examples

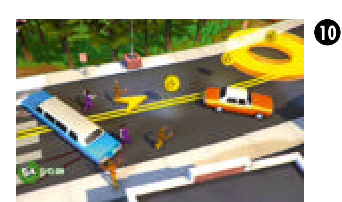


❶ As with some of the other games on this list, two-button fighting game distillation *Divekick Addition Edition* is also coming to Sony's consoles. This version includes character stat tweaks and adds blind selection for ranked matches.
❷ Made as part of this year's Global Game Jam, Through Games' Kinect-based puzzle-platformer *Fru* enables players to use their own silhouette to reveal a hidden world.
❸ Another puzzle-platformer, though this time one that uses light and shadow to offer an alternative dimension, Compulsion Games' *Contrast* is charming if you can ignore the cracks in its design.
❹ A strategy game set in space, *Habitat* casts the player as an engineer who must build an orbiting space station for refugees, using junk ejected from an Earth beset by destructive nanomachines.
❺ Gateway Interactive is working with *Super Hexagon* composer Niamh Houston, AKA Chipzel, to create *Spectra: 8bit Racing*, a procedurally generated racer based on tunes from her latest album.
❻ BetaDwarf is bringing its co-op brawler, *Forced*, over from Steam. As slaves enrolled in the "toughest fantasy gladiator school of them all", you battle for your freedom along with up to three other friends.
❼ Another platform for Alex Preston's hugely anticipated action-RPG *Hyper Light Drifter*. The game takes its inspiration from the 2D adventures that Preston enjoyed in his youth, and promises to offer a stern challenge.
❽ *Strike Suit Zero: Director's Cut* refurbishes the mecha dogfighter with a restructured campaign, all-new dialogue and improved graphics, as well as including the Heroes Of The Fleet mission and two further Strike Suits.
❾ Nicalis's terrifyingly difficult platformer *1001 Spikes* furnishes players with one life per titular spike to make it through the game. That sounds generous, but this is *Rick Dangerous* dialled up to 1,001.
❿ *Roundabout* sells itself as an "open-world driving puzzle game", but it's more useful to think of this as a limo-themed *Kuru Kuru Kururin*. You move your rotating vehicle through cluttered streets while picking up passengers and trying not to flatten other pedestrians.

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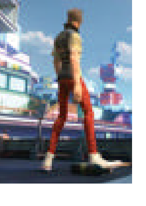
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MICROSOFT NEEDS EXCLUSIVES MORE THAN EVER.

"I run firstparty studios, so I'm all about exclusives," Spencer says. "When we talk to people, that exclusive content is the number one reason that gamers buy a given console, so I'm going to stay extremely focused on bringing great exclusive content to the box. It's critical."

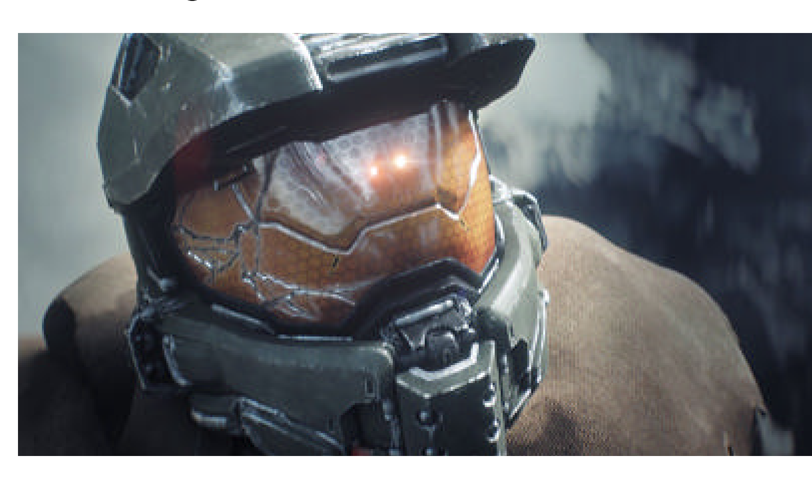
Despite this, information is bafflingly scarce. 343 Industries' new *Halo* will doubtless form the backbone of Xbox One's Q4 lineup, and Insomniac's open-world shooter *Sunset Overdrive* is also expected this year. Those aside, little is known about Microsoft's plans, and Spencer won't talk specifics. He's teasing a big release from a "wonderful" Japanese studio – his choice of adjective sparking speculation that Platinum Games is the developer in question – but until Microsoft shows its hand at E3, it's hard to see where the next big thing is coming from. *Halo* defined the first Xbox, and *Gears Of War* did likewise for 360. New games in both those series are coming, the latter in development at Black Tusk Studios after Microsoft bought the IP from Epic Games, but new consoles are rarely sold on sequels alone. Spencer says E3 will be "great... a real moment for us in this generation". In the meantime, he has little choice but to talk up *Titanfall*. "That's a definitive experience for us. Cloud-powered, multiplayer, it looks beautiful, it plays beautifully: all the things that have been [attractive] about an Xbox [One] game, it embodies a lot of them."



Yet these days, a console's software lineup is about more than big-budget blockbusters. While Microsoft's lack of a plan for indie games at Xbox One's launch is perhaps the most confusing of its litany of oversights, it has belatedly got things back on track with ID@XBox, an indie self-publishing programme whose first 25 games were unveiled last month. "We've been inundated with applications," Harrison says. "Two- hundred-and-fifty developers already have devkits and are building games for Xbox One; that is more than the entire independent developer count on 360 throughout its entire lifetime. To have that many developers, and that much interest, is really healthy for players, and it's also super-healthy for the game industry. It's a better on-ramp for developers to get into our space."

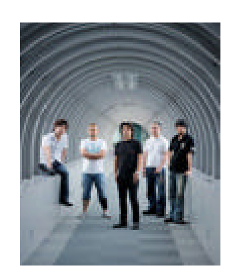


That ramp, though, is not without its bumps. Chief among them is Microsoft's notorious parity clause, which forbids developers from releasing their games anywhere else before they're available on Xbox. Not having an equivalent is why Sony was able to show off such a spread of indie games at E3 last year: many of them



Though Bungie is no longer helming, *Halo* remains an appealing and key part of the slim suite of Xbox One-exclusive games

either already have, or will, hit Steam before launching on PS4. The parity demand is a policy that served Microsoft well in the early days of Xbox Live Arcade, when competition was scant, but these days Microsoft needs indies much more than indies need Microsoft. Small studios have plenty of options elsewhere, not least a rival platform holder that is willing to handle the port work for them. Barely a month goes by without another announcement of a coveted indie title heading to PlayStation, and independent studios have played a vital role in fleshing out PS4's release schedule. A Microsoft rep told us earlier this year that the parity clause was up for discussion on a case-by-case basis, while the GDC rumour mill had it that it will soon be discarded. That would have been unthinkable from Microsoft in the 360 generation, but the position of strength it enjoyed is gone. It would be no surprise to see that outmoded policy thrown on the bonfire with all the others.

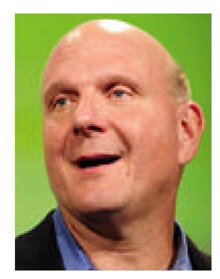


***Bayonetta* creator Platinum Games is rumoured to be developing for Xbox One**

And the longer it stays in place, the greater the opportunity for Sony to further increase its standing. On the eve of GDC, Sony's VP of publisher and developer relations, Adam Boyes, tweeted a picture of a mocked-up presentation slide titled "Platforms that you are not allowed to release a game on prior to releasing it on PlayStation platforms". Below it was a blank list of bullet points. A cheap shot, perhaps, but Sony reaps the mindshare rewards with every blow it lands, and Microsoft keeps leaving its guard down. Harrison says he laughed at Boyes' tweet, but it was a timely reminder that exclusive and indie games, improved dev tools and user interfaces, and even revised policies will only take Xbox One so far. Its biggest problem remains Sony, which offers the more powerful box at a more attractive price, and has a better







Clockwise from above: former Studios head Marc Whitten now works for Sonos; Don Mattrick left for Zynga; CEO Steve Ballmer has also stepped down, but has yet to leave

standing among developers and players alike. The hubris that gave rise to PlayStation 3 has gone, as are many of the execs associated with it.

It may help Microsoft that many of the faces associated with Xbox One's bungled beginnings are also now gone. Don Mattrick, former president of Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment Business (the division responsible for Xbox), quit to go work at Zynga. CEO Steve Ballmer has retired. And on the eve of GDC, chief product officer Marc Whitten left to take up the same position at wireless audio leader Sonos. Microsoft has a new CEO, Satya Nadella, and IEB has a new president in former Nokia CEO Stephen Elop, but Molyneux believes that the most significant departure of them all will be Whitten's.

"He was very influential," Molyneux explains. "Perhaps more than you realise, because he was in charge of all of the software – the operating system side. A lot of the things Phil Spencer's group wanted to do, quite often they didn't happen because they weren't implemented on the operating system side. Him leaving softens quite a few lines."

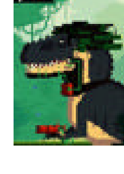
It leaves Harrison and Spencer as the public faces of Xbox, and being able to put two execs with extensive experience of the game industry in front of press, players and creators will surely help with image repair. Epic CEO **Tim Sweeney** says the two Phils "have done a great job of opening up to the community and talking as real human beings about Microsoft's plans, and that's a really welcome change from what was previously a very PR-driven company. I'm very hopeful Microsoft is getting through this long winter of mismanagement. It came from the top, despite the best efforts of the guys in the trenches, and I'm hopeful they'll do a lot of good things."

"TWO-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY DEVS ALREADY HAVE DEVKITS AND ARE BUILDING GAMES FOR XBOX ONE"

Yet even those management changes have brought on bad headlines. When he was in the running for the CEO gig, Elop was reported to be considering selling off the Xbox business, something investors and analysts have long called for. In his first memo to staff after taking up the CEO role, Nadella spoke of a "software-powered world" and a "mobile- and cloud-first world", which on the face of it doesn't seem to leave much room for Xbox. The financial press believes Nadella will seek to sell the division, or spin it out into a separate company for which he would not be ultimately responsible.

"You've never heard that from us," Spencer says. "Xbox is maybe the most relevant brand that Microsoft has with consumers today. We're going to maintain our consumer focus. We're spending a ton of money, bringing in Nokia [with] 30,000 people joining the company to go build consumer phones. Consumer is part of what this company is. You think about the Xbox brand and all the equity around it, people lining up at midnight outside of Game to go get the console – how many Microsoft products have that? It's an asset that's extremely valuable, and since our future ambition is to grow our consumer relevance, Xbox has to be at the centre of that. When I have discussions with Satya, or Stephen, or [EVP of operating systems] Terry Myerson, it is more about how we make this brand, this product and this proposition more relevant to our customers, and not at all in the opposite direction."

These words are encouraging. Xbox One's troubled start had many causes, but none would have been quite so disastrous had Microsoft's messaging not also been so incredibly misguided. The common perception created was of a box built not to serve players or developers, but Microsoft's business goals. With the suits who defined those goals now gone; a management team in place focused not on the needs of those selling the box but on the people working and playing on it; patches to solve many of its teething troubles; and the worst of the PR nightmare now hopefully behind it, Xbox One is in its best position since May 2013 and its disastrous unveiling. Microsoft should also be able take heart in Sony's experience with PlayStation 3, which began with $599 and Giant Enemy Crabs and ended with *The Last Of Us*, PlayStation Plus and eventually even better sales than Xbox 360. Whether or not Nadella and Elop give Harrison and Spencer enough time to see things through is another matter. ■





AN AUDIENCE WITH...

KEN LOBB

Microsoft Game Studios' guiding hand talks Xbox One, filling the genre gap, and Killer Instinct

By Michael Gapper

When **Ken Lobb** defected to Microsoft in 2002 after nine years of service as Nintendo's development manager, his name was already shrouded in an aura of industry reverence. Often an unseen influence, he was perhaps best known as the designer behind *Killer Instinct* (and the voice of Chief Thunder); the Nintendo-side support for *GoldenEye 007*, lending his name to its infamously terrible firearm; and the executive producer of *Command & Conquer*. Since becoming the creative director of Microsoft Game Studios, he's maintained that mystique, remaining unknown to many players but popping up in the credits of such games as *Crackdown*, *Gears Of War*, *Fable* and *Project Gotham Racing*. *Killer Instinct*'s recent rebirth has returned him to the public eye, but here we ask the industry veteran to talk about the thoughts and processes that inform the Xbox One lineup, the console's technical teething troubles, and new Microsoft studio Black Tusk.

You began your career as a designer, but these days you oversee many studios. Do you miss the chance to be hands-on with your games?

I do miss the 'I'm going to build one thing and focus on it heavily' thing, but the reality is that I get to touch anywhere from ten to 20 things. I don't do it in passing. I get to decide which thing I'm going to go focus on for a day, a week, a month, and still keep my eye on everything else that's going on. I like to help make teams think about how they can make their games ten points better once things have already been built, rather than help them pick apart the bugs they already know about. I tend to be playing four or five things at a time, too, but there are games that I'll focus on. *Assassin's Creed IV* wiped my slate for a week. But in general, I'll be playing two or three things at a time as a gamer, and I'll be working on four or five things at once. I enjoy it.

How much has the way you develop games changed to respond to the way people play these days?

I believe the industry is changing in terms of what I call 'time slice management'. It used to be we would build games thinking, 'How often do I let someone save? How long is a level? What's the reward loop and how long is it?' The way I urge a lot of my designers to think nowadays is: if you're a console game, you know that a lot of players aren't going to turn you on unless they have more than 15 minutes to play. I'm OK with ten-minute levels on the tablet, but I still prefer to play tablet games where I know I can turn it off in a minute. The reality is we architected Xbox One to be fast, to let your games load quickly, and with the HDMI in, [fast enough if] you want to [play a game] on a commercial break. Being able to think about game design in terms of different time slices is what creative designers need to be doing nowadays. There should be parts of a game I can play just for a minute and it'll be rewarding. But I also want big quests, because console games are about sitting on a couch, kicking back and playing for three hours.

Instant resume is one of Xbox One's distinguishing features, but thirdparty developers are struggling with some of the console's other architectural elements. Are your studios facing similar difficulty with the system's ESRAM and hitting 1080p?

Any time you have a new piece of technology, there's always going to be a learning curve, and we are in the first couple of months. Anybody who worked before with [360's] EDRAM has some advantage over other developers now with the RAM.

You're a creative person who's been involved in the development process for a very long time, so how do you balance the need for Microsoft to have a comprehensive portfolio with your own desire to develop unusual games?

Well, regarding the portfolio, we look at a bunch of things people want to make and then we have to make decisions. I'll take an easy one: do we really need FPS number five? In a world where we've already done well in that space? So maybe it's better to work on something like *Project Spark*. Here's a team that wanted to do this super-creative thing built on top of Kodu – something that came out of Microsoft research – but it takes a long time to build these things. The original design on *Spark* is pre-*Minecraft*. It wasn't like, 'Hey, look at this creation thing people are doing.' When you look at it from a portfolio perspective, it's like, 'Great, we have a game in the creation space, which is super big.' But that's not where that game started. It started from a core group of people that were passionate about create as play, play as creation, not because of some portfolio slot. If we end up with voids in our portfolio, the reality is that thirdparties fill all voids. You don't have to do a game to compete against a thirdparty; it's already on our platform.

Assassin's Creed IV is one of only a few recent games to steal Lobb's attention in its entirety for a week





Lobb has already been instrumental for Xbox One, overseeing partners such as Crytek and Double Helix on the way to launch





At the time of writing, the slate of games Lobb's playing includes *Tomb Raider*, *Killer Instinct*, *Juice Cubes*, *XCOM* on iPad, *Shadowrun*, *A Link Between Worlds* and *Tearaway*, which he describes as being "a beautiful, gorgeous game with cool design"

CV

Ken Lobb began his career as a product manager and designer at NES game developer Taxan USA. By 1991, Taxan had left the development scene and Lobb moved to Namco and then Nintendo, where he produced dozens of titles between 1993 and 2002. He is credited as designer and voice actor on *Killer Instinct*, and has been offered special thanks on countless Nintendo games from the mid to late '90s. Since 2002, he has worked as Microsoft's creative director, working with Microsoft studios directly and shaping the direction of the publisher's portfolio.

Do you feel that Microsoft has, under the Microsoft Game Studio umbrella, the diversity that Sony has?
Absolutely. I've been publishing for a long time, and I hesitate to say I know everybody, but I know a lot of people in the industry that I can go out and hire to work either internally or [in a] publishing relationship. That can sometimes lead to things like the Double Helix experience [the *Killer Instinct* developer was recently bought out by Amazon], but to be honest, although I feel bad about it, I feel great about it. I think we added value to Double Helix by both signing them, and then helping them reach their dream of shipping this game. Again, all credit to them, but we helped them get better. And you could say it sounds kind of lame and altruistic, [but] I like when we sign an external partner and their value in the industry goes up. That's a goal I always have. How do we help external developers get better at what they do? I think we do it really well. And in that sense, I can get whatever I want.

To answer your question in a different way, we don't slot fill. It's not a game we play. I want to go and find developers that want to make a game that they think is perfect, and then we'll decide if that is something that's interesting to us from a business perspective and also from a portfolio perspective. [But it's] not, "Gee, I need a fighting game. I should make one of those."

But wasn't Turn 10 essentially created to compete with Polyphony and *Gran Turismo*?
Not really. You can look at the business [side] and say that Turn 10 was built to compete, but the reality was that we had a bunch of car fanatics who really wanted to have a go at making a racing game. The core of that team was there the two years before *Forza 1* shipped. It wasn't leadership coming down and saying, "We must build Polyphony. Let's create a team." It was from passion first. That's where *Forza* came from.

When you're working with the likes of Turn 10 and Double Helix, do you make demands of your teams to mix long and short gameplay loops, to take advantage of instant resume, and so on?
I like that word, 'demand'. No, I demand nothing of the partners that I work with. I think that's the publisher's role to convince our partners, 'Here's these cool features; you might do something like this stuff.' We find them because they have a great game and not because they're going to follow some demand for some platform feature they must support. I need to be able to convince them that this stuff is cool and it's going to make their game better. If they disagree, then great, then I'll talk to them about the next thing I think could make their game better, which is maybe a [hardware] feature and maybe it's not. My job, and the job of my team, is to help the developer make their best game.

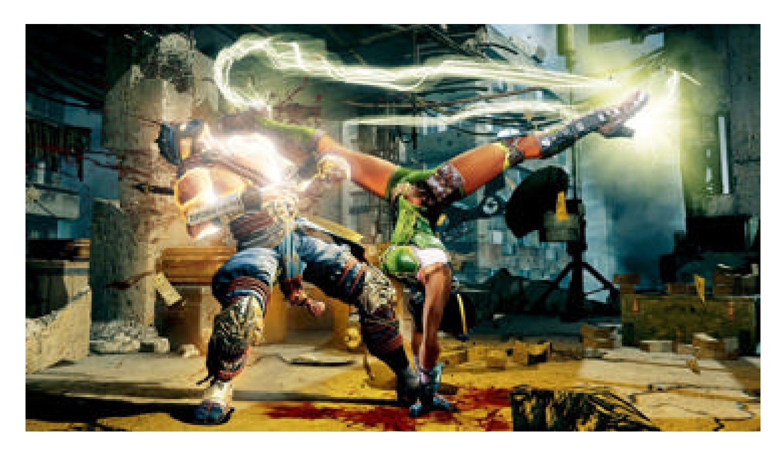
You talk about studios with innovative ideas and not making demands, but Microsoft built a studio expressly to have an innovative idea: Black Tusk, which pitched a new idea at E3. So why then put that team to work on *Gears Of War* instead?
I actually have tons of respect for Chuck [Osieja, creative director] and all the guys up at Black Tusk. I think the reality is what we have is innovative *Gears Of War*. That's what I believe they're going to make. They're an internal studio, but the reality is it's cool to have [an IP] that can be a grand slam right out of the gate. The concepts they've been toying with are awesome. You take what

"I LIKE THAT WORD, 'DEMAND'. I DEMAND NOTHING OF THE PARTNERS THAT I WORK WITH. I THINK THAT'S THE PUBLISHER'S ROLE"

they were thinking about and their expertise on Unreal Engine 4, because that's what they've been playing with since their founding, and really go with the IP. Again, this was a mutually agreed thing. It's not, "Here's this thing you must take." That's not the way Phil [Spencer] works; that's not the way we work.

Rare has proven itself to be a house of ideas in the past, working with you at Nintendo. That innovation was evident in *Viva Piñata* and *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts*, so why is the studio now tasked with *Kinect Sports* and other Kinect apps?
It's easy to forget that Rare created the avatars; that was their idea. It wasn't like someone said, "Hey, we need these characters to live in the shell." It was Rare creating this thing that they wanted to get in a game, and it was Rare super-excited and engaged very early on with Kinect that led to *Kinect Sports*. It's not like this was Phil or Don [Mattrick] or somebody going, "Thou shalt build this thing." We'll see what they're doing next; it's up to them. I will say I've played *Kinect Sports Rivals* and it's a Rare game. It's the only way I can describe it.

Our studios run themselves as relatively independent studios. They have very strong voices in the decisions about what they should be working on. I loved *Viva Piñata*; I loved *Nuts & Bolts*. Naysayers can say what they want; I always wanted *Banjo 3*, too, but I loved *Nuts & Bolts*. Rare used to sell millions of everything they made, and I think it's the audience that helped them [decide what to make next]. *Piñata* was one of the best games Rare ever made and I wish it would've sold millions, because it was super-creative and I love the direction it took Rare. But every group of people wants to continue to do what they love doing. The original *Kinect Sports* was their best seller as an Xbox-owned developer; that's why they would go and do another one.



Lobb stayed closer to *Killer Instinct*'s 2013 reboot than any other game in the Xbox One launch lineup, even returning to provide the voice of Thunder

It's interesting that Double Helix was tasked with *Killer Instinct* rather than Rare. It otherwise seems like a project you kept very close.
[Double Helix] gave us their best pitch for *Killer Instinct* and that was a prototype that was playable. I was deeply involved in *Killer Instinct 1* and *2* working at Nintendo with Rare. I designed the core combo system and worked closely with them on basically every character on the game and all the animations. It's an IP that I love dearly, both from the memory of working with these guys and also because it's kind of fun to go to the arcade and win a lot. I was able to bring some of that back. [Creative director] Adam Isgreen ran the product internally, and we had a bunch of great designers working with Double Helix to make the game. That was a game where I went literally no more than two or three days without looking at it for pretty much the whole time it was in development. I love the genre, so I cared a lot about making sure the game was balanced.

How do you transfer the expertise Double Helix gained making the game to another studio now that *Killer Instinct* has been handed on?
Well, we helped Double Helix. [The studio] was already in a very good state. They had a good understanding of what *Killer Instinct* was and had some fans. We brought in Mike Z [*Skullgirls* designer Mike Zaimont] as a consultant. He's a huge *Killer Instinct* fan, and part of my push was that it needs to make *Killer Instinct* fans happy, but it needs to be modern, clean, balanced and broader than the original game was. Adam Isgreen is a longtime fighting fan and a brilliant designer going back to the Westwood days. We also have James Goddard internally under me, who is a designer who worked at Double Helix in the past and, of course, he also did *Street Fighter II Turbo: Hyper Fighting* back in his days at Capcom. We [Microsoft Game Studios] were very involved in the design of every character in the new *KI*, and it's just ▶

Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts wasn't well received in 2008, but Lobb loved the game, whose flexible DIY components were ahead of their time





Lobb's name is most commonly known to many players through its association with *GoldenEye 007*'s worst gun, the Klobb. "It was an honour to be named after the Spyder," he tweeted. "License To Kill made it all good and passing of time made it brilliant"

going to continue as we go forward. What I'm saying is: we were deeply involved in *Killer Instinct*. We were deeply involved in the creation of the game; I don't want to put a percentage on it, but both sides were responsible for the product that shipped. All of the credit in the world to Double Helix – they did a fantastic job and I wish them all the luck in the future. I wish we were doing a next version with them, but the reality of the business is that sometimes that doesn't work out. We've already got a solution I think players will be happy with.

Is staying largely hands-off as creative director the way you worked in your Nintendo days?
It's something I learned from the very first games I worked on, even when I ran them. The reality is that a game is made up of a team of people that are all at some level creative. They want to have some voice; they want to have some ownership. And while I'm talking about a team that I've signed for potentially tens of millions of dollars, part of what I'm signing is their passion and their ownership of their idea. So I can't ever get to the point where a developer just says, "Tell me what to do and I'll go do it." It doesn't help to go and take the world's best artist and give him a bunch of tasks to draw pretty pictures. We've signed you – we know you can draw pretty pictures.

You've been credited on hundreds of games between Nintendo and Microsoft. Of all the projects you've worked on, which was the most satisfying?
Super Metroid is one of the games I'm most proud of, but I didn't have that much to do with it, other than playing it and making suggestions. And bingo: I ended up in the credits. That was super-awesome. I'm a huge *Metroid* fan. I ran XBLA for a few years, and one of the first games I signed was *Shadow Complex*. With *Shadow Complex*, we had a group of people that knew exactly what they wanted to make. It was just really fun saying, "Here's the core of what I think makes a *Metroid* game. Think about speed running. Think about secrets and breaking the game." These things are in a perfect *Metroid* game, like I would say *Metroid Prime* ended up being. Someday, [let's have] *Shadow Complex 2*, guys, please! Someday! I also helped kick off *Metroid Prime* before I left Nintendo, and went through the whole "Why are you doing it firstperson?" thing. Fun times.

Did you have to fight for the firstperson viewpoint?
Not internally. The fight, in the pre-Internet world, was that we were getting a lot of pressure from fans. Nowadays, you'd be buried under Twitter, NeoGAF – both of which I love, by the way – but those voices are even louder today than they were back then. It comes back to a lesson I learned a long time ago: always listen to your customer, but also understand that if you do focus testing what you're going to hear is, "I want that thing you did last time, because that was awesome." Every once in a while, you have to learn to not listen to that and go, "Actually, *Metroid* in firstperson we think could make more sense." Great creatives are going to disrupt their earlier designs and make things that are new, or build completely new games or new genres.

"I HELPED KICK OFF METROID PRIME, AND WENT THROUGH THE 'WHY ARE YOU DOING IT FIRSTPERSON?' THING. FUN TIMES"

In the future, how will you and your developers manage working with new hardware?
I think the biggest transitions were to 3D way back, but in the last generation [transition], there hasn't been a dramatic change between 360 and Xbox One. A little more so on the PS3 to PS4 side, just because of the complexities around their architecture has moved them a bit more towards a traditional design. But at the same time, the reality is that we now have very high-res textures and incredibly detailed models, and asset creation becomes a bigger and bigger portion of the challenge of great game design. When you have multimillion-poly cars, or you have hours of performance capture that needs to be mocapped, plus acting and audio all happening at the same time, you get complexities in content creation that are not necessarily harder than they were, but clearly they're more complex. That's the biggest impact on the transition. What's interesting for me, though, is at the same time you have *Minecraft* as the number-one-selling game of all time. I think that's beautiful... We've cracked the uncanny valley and now a broader portion of the audience is starting to appreciate design as much as art. To me, that's the ultimate next gen. The next generation is where we can create high-definition content, and yet I can still play cool, abstract, creative content and have both sides compete for game of the year. I think that's the next gen. ■



Super Metroid **remains one of Lobb's all-time favourite games and was instrumental in his suggestions to *Shadow Complex* creator Chair**



LEGENDARY

Why are players of 30-year-old games still chasing new high scores?

By Tony Coles

The twisted tale of gaming rivalry documented in 2007's The King Of Kong isn't responsible for starting the high-score-chasing scene that surrounds vintage arcade games, but it certainly fuelled interest in it. Nearly seven years on, *Donkey Kong*'s highest scores remain hotly contested. Plastic surgeon **Hank Chien** set the most recent world record in 2012, accumulating 1,138,600 points, some 90,000 over the final score laid down by Steve Wiebe in The King Of Kong. It was the third time the American had raised the record that year and his fifth world-beating score in a row since 2010. His skill has proven almost unassailable. Almost.

Chien's scores were set on real arcade hardware, which is the only format that matters to high-score chasers. However, a fellow American, Dean Saglio, used arcade emulator MAME on his PC to break the 1.2 million score barrier in October 2013. Emulators are easy to exploit, so hardware matters, but the history of high-score competitions is rarely about the interface and more about the hands playing it.

Chien's rise to the top of the *Donkey Kong* rankings starts with MAME. "The film [The King Of Kong] got me intrigued. Initially, I started playing out of curiosity, but I quickly realised the depth of the gameplay and that I was naturally gifted at it," Chien says. "In the very beginning, I played a lot, perhaps three hours per day. After reaching the killscreen – the moment a bug makes the game unplayable – I had a huge sense of satisfaction and toned it down to about one hour per day." It marked another turning point for Chien, too: he bought a *Donkey Kong* cabinet. He had the means and talent to challenge the names made famous by The King Of Kong, and did so. He's dominated the scene for years.

Donkey Kong is a race to achieve the highest possible score before level 22's timer bug kicks in. Saglio's run proves there's still enough wiggle room left to hit 1,206,800 points, but fellow killscreen legend *Pac-Man* hit its score limit in 1999 when Billy Mitchell played the perfect game of the Namco classic. His record hasn't stopped others trying to reach his milestone 3,333,360 points, though.

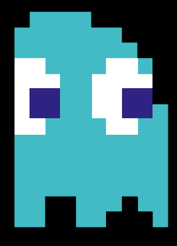
Jon Stoodley is the UK's best *Pac-Man* player, and he's still chasing that perfect run. He's managed to get 3,331,540 points to date. Some 31 years ago, his record was the world record, standing at 3,221,000. For Stoodley, *Pac-Man* has been 'his game' for most of his life, and Mitchell's perfect run is a goal that keeps pushing him forward. "It's my intention to recreate [the perfect game] here in the UK at a live event," he says. "Everyone has their own personal goal, and because the idea of a perfect game was considered nonsense some years back, the incredible application needed to achieve it is the challenge." As far as he's concerned, three decades is time well spent. "To be one of only half-a-dozen people in the world to have climbed this mountain is most definitely worth it. Some see it as the Holy Grail in arcade gaming."

"TO BE ONE OF ONLY SIX PEOPLE TO HAVE CLIMBED THIS MOUNTAIN… SOME SEE IT AS THE HOLY GRAIL IN ARCADE GAMING"

Stoodley's lifelong relationship with *Pac-Man* fits the vintage score-attacker mould that Hank Chien bucks: hardened masters who have played their game for its lifetime as well as theirs. For Chien, however, as an eager learner with natural talent, the Internet was vital. "In the *Donkey Kong* scene, YouTube and livestreams have helped all of us improve our game tremendously," he says. "Thanks to the Internet and watching various people play, I was able to improve my score to 1 million points. It was then that I realised I was an 'expert' and capable of getting the world record at the time."

Stoodley's training couldn't be more different, but his mindset is more revivalist than hardcore score chaser. "I have an original *Pac-Man* Midway cabaret arcade machine that I completely restored. It has to be absolutely original for me in order to feel comfortable achieving a perfect game of *Pac-Man*." He also places an unusual limit on himself: "I play 'freehand', which means not using any patterns [to maximise scores] in the first 21 boards. This is the exact way that I played in 1982." This makes for a more improvisational and intriguing game to watch than Mitchell's robotic run. Stoodley has to shepherd the ghosts off the cuff, eschewing modern techniques such as Continuous Forward Motion patterns, which are often researched by digging deep into the game using emulators.

Emulation's value in the scene can't be underestimated, it seems. Chien considers it an essential tool. "Occasionally, I'll experiment with new techniques on MAME, because it's ▶



Dedicated *Pac-Man* players have, with the help of emulation tools, discovered patterns for each 'board' to rinse them for huge scores

easier to skip to a specific point in the game by using save states. I can practise the same thing over and over, or save a specific situation to study it later," he explains.

For **Paul Spriggs**, the UK's top *Robotron*, *Defender* and *Stargate* player, it's his main method of play. "A working cab will cost a grand and be unreliable as hell," he says. "I bought a PlayStation when they first came out with the sole intention of playing *Defender* and *Robotron* [in Digital Eclipse's *Williams Arcade Classics*]. My original *Defender* cabinet got thrown out three years earlier, because I was told that it couldn't be fixed!" Spriggs quickly worked out that a PlayStation fighting stick would suit both *Robotron* and *Defender*, and today promotes accurate recreations of original cabinet controls via the Williams Defender Players Unite Facebook group. "These controllers cost between £100 and £150 and don't take up the room," he explains. And, being microswitch perfect, they are a bridge emulator players can use to train for breaking records on original hardware.

Robotron is an unusual case where high scores are contested not on original hardware, but via emulation. "*Robotron* had a bug in it that caused the game to sometimes crash and reset if you fired diagonally and hit the outer wall," Spriggs explains. "We thought in the '80s it was a voltage spike or hardware fault, but it's a software problem, since it happens in MAME too. I now play *Robotron* using a particular bugfixed ROM version that doesn't crash. It was done with [*Robotron* creator] Larry DeMar and Digital Eclipse, so we accept it as a legit version." As for that fighting stick, it's still Spriggs' weapon of choice. "I still play *Robotron* using four buttons for firing rather than two sticks, and can still play indefinitely, because I've played *Robotron* for longer using that stick than I did in the arcades!"

For top players such as Spriggs, *Robotron*'s intense mixture of aggression and claustrophobia holds an allure that hasn't diminished in 32 years. However, as part of an elite group that can play to the point where survival is largely academic, Spriggs finds that it has become an endurance sport, and believes players must make up new challenges to entertain themselves. "I think *Robotron* has gone as far as it can, gameplay-wise. The only challenges left are to see how far you can get without the game awarding you a bonus man every 25,000 points, and we are having tournaments based on this, but it isn't the same. The risk-versus-reward factor vanishes, since it's all risk, and the game loses its appeal." *Robotron* has no standard killscreen and the highest possible score is only capped by a player's ability to stay focused. Limitlessness has made it a poor showpiece for score chasing, but that might yet change. "Larry [DeMar] is using a few spare bytes of ROM to slightly change the game," Spriggs explains, "and we're hoping he can create something that will make it harder to play for master players." Authenticity takes a back seat for *Robotron*'s high-score scene.

Williams' other lauded Jarvis and DeMar classic, *Defender*, remains a mountain to climb even after 34 years of intensive play by the world's most skilled. According to **Mikael Lindholm**, credited as the best *Defender* player in the world by his peers, it has plenty more to give. "In theory, it's possible to play this game indefinitely on its max difficulty settings, using no Smart Bombs or Hyperspace, and on a single ship," he says. "You can always get better at this game; it will always keep challenging you. And this is why I'm still attracted to it after so many years. You can always develop new moves and solutions to different situations. Your accuracy, execution and timing can always get better." Lindholm also has a hopeful outlook for the future of *Defender* play. "What will it look like when someone is playing on the very edge of skill? I hope there are some *Defender* monsters out there who have kept playing for all these years and never stopped challenging themselves. It really bugs me that I could've – should've – been that guy".

Lindholm's self-criticism stems from a break he took in 1991, which lasted until he dusted off his *Defender* cab in 2010. Bought in 1985, while he was still at school, his personal *Defender* machine now stars in YouTube videos of virtuoso play that are stunning in their fluidity and grace. He first played the game in 1981, though, scoring a pitiful but common 450 points. "It was love at first sight. How could anything be so cool? No other game had talked to me like *Defender*; I felt it was 'my' game," he recalls.

High-level *Defender* is improvisational chaos. It marries twitch skill with a control method that presents a colossal barrier to entry, but becomes a fine instrument once mastered. "Once you've learned the basics of manoeuvring your ship ▶

"IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT. HOW COULD ANYTHING BE SO COOL? NO OTHER GAME HAD TALKED TO ME LIKE DEFENDER"



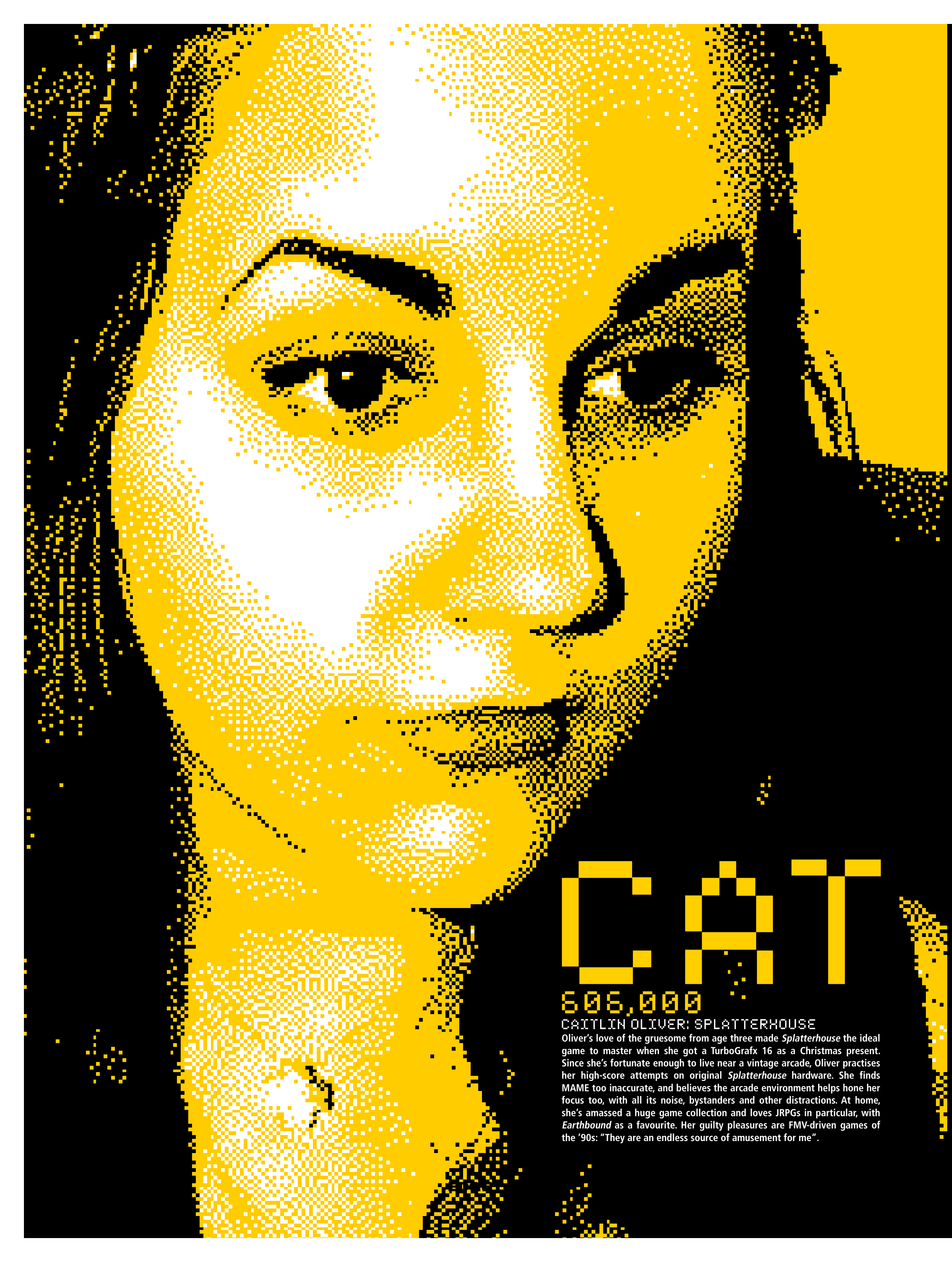
With tournament settings, *Missile Command* offers no bonus cities, so record runs cannot recover easily from mistakes

TT

4,472,570

TONY TEMPLE: MISSILE COMMAND (TOURNAMENT SETTINGS)

Temple was 14 when *Missile Command* arrived at his local arcade. Drawn in by its theme of nuclear armageddon, he sees the game as "a dark passenger that I can't shake off". A recognised expert in all aspects of *Missile Command*, he has an original cabinet restored by developer Archer MacLean. It's one of only ten machines of its kind in the UK. A true arcade collector, Temple also has *Donkey Kong*, *Asteroids*, *Tempest*, *Centipede* and *Space Fever* cabinets. In terms of more recent games, he leans towards FPS titles, with *Half-Life 2* as a favourite.



CAT

606,000

CAITLIN OLIVER: SPLATTERHOUSE

Oliver's love of the gruesome from age three made *Splatterhouse* the ideal game to master when she got a TurboGrafx 16 as a Christmas present. Since she's fortunate enough to live near a vintage arcade, Oliver practises her high-score attempts on original *Splatterhouse* hardware. She finds MAME too inaccurate, and believes the arcade environment helps hone her focus too, with all its noise, bystanders and other distractions. At home, she's amassed a huge game collection and loves JRPGs in particular, with *Earthbound* as a favourite. Her guilty pleasures are FMV-driven games of the '90s: "They are an endless source of amusement for me".

and can catch falling humanoids, the experience is freedom," Lindholm says. "There is no limit to the complex manoeuvres these controls allow you to do."

It's easy to see why Lindholm believes *Defender* is far from being truly mastered. Indeed, the game's high-score record was last broken in October 2013 by Texan game developer Billy Joe Cain, who scored 33,644,750 points in 32 and a half hours. The record was livestreamed and set using marathon settings – the factory defaults, which allow plenty of extra ships, providing the breathing room required when eating and bathroom breaks force a stoppage in play.

Lindholm's personal *Defender* journey is different. He's trying to roll the score over (which occurs at 1,000,000 points) on maximum difficulty, using the dreaded original blue ROM, which is considerably harder than the standard red version used in most record attempts. His YouTube video from 2012, in which he reaches 909,000 with the difficulty set at 99-99 (starting difficulty at 99, progressive difficulty increase 99, making it as hard as *Defender* can be by level five), is 67 minutes of the game at its most murderous. Cain's marathon run, by contrast, starts at zero difficulty and tops out at 30.

The difference between Chien and Lindholm's skill-based runs and Spriggs and Cain's endurance tests highlights the division in the vintage score-attack scene between marathon and tournament play. It's a difference not just in the game, but also the type of player capable of chasing the highest scores.

Tony Temple is the UK's best *Missile Command* player and current tournament record holder. With no bonus cities and no chance to rest, Temple set his record with a score of 4,472,570 in 2010, stopping only when a button on the cabinet failed. The marathon record, where cities are typically replenished after every 10,000 points, is a different matter. Swede Victor Sandberg broke the score record for *Missile Command* and set a personal one for sheer endurance. His closing score of 103,809,990 took over 71 hours, starting on December 27, 2013.

While Sandberg's superhuman feat impresses through dedication and resilience, Temple prefers *Missile Command* at the limit of stress management: "You get six cities to start the game, and once they're gone, they're gone. It's *Missile Command* intensified. The most difficult thing is coping with the fact that the game could end at any moment. You are on a knife's edge after just ten minutes of play. From that point on, the pressure is relentless. To be an hour into a great game only to have your game dashed by a sucker-punch missile from a low satellite on the far edge of the screen is difficult to recover from mentally."

Like Lindholm, Temple believes *Missile Command*'s chaotic gameplay creates space for talented players to improve their skills. "There are no patterns to learn on *Missile Command*, so it's really about being on top of your tactics and strategies. There are no resting spots; there is no time to think. The game has so much depth. There are all sorts of challenges you can set yourself, whether you're picking the game up for the first time or whether you're a more experienced player."

The modern high-score record community isn't just about the pre-'85 icons. Since The King Of Kong brought the drama of the scene to a wider audience, the scope has been broadened by plumbing arcade gaming's golden years. US player **Caitlin Oliver** broke the *Splatterhouse* world record in November 2013 with a score of 606,000. While not the most obvious target for world record attempts, *Splatterhouse* is nonetheless a deeply personal game for Oliver, with much the same story of childhood discovery, mastery and eventual world domination. "My father got me a TurboGrafx 16 for Christmas one year, and I had to rent games, guessing based on box art whether or not I'd like it. I picked *Splatterhouse* and I fell in love," she says. "It was the craziest thing I had ever played and I couldn't get enough!"

Her journey to the world record has its own thread of serendipity. Access to a fabulously stocked retro arcade and a passer-by's comment set the challenge: "I had gone to the Galloping Ghost Arcade [in Brookfield, Illinois], and was playing *Splatterhouse*, since I always enjoyed it and this was the only arcade I knew that had a machine. One of the guys who worked there asked if I was going for a world record or something. I told him that I wasn't and was just playing. But it stuck with me. Why not try for a record?" Oliver believes that *Splatterhouse* is almost exhausted at 606,000 points, bar using a glitch on the final boss to gain two KO scores, which is legal in Japan's high-score community, but not in the US. She has moved onto an even more obscure curio from the late JAMMA (Japan Amusement Machine and Marketing ▶

"THE MOST DIFFICULT THING IS COPING WITH THE FACT THE GAME COULD END AT ANY MOMENT. YOU ARE ON A KNIFE'S EDGE"



This high-score scene isn't reserved solely for games of the early '80s; Namco's *Splatterhouse*, for example, appeared in arcades in 1988

Association) era: Banpresto's *Super Spacefortress Macross*. As a vertically scrolling shoot 'em up, it couldn't be more different in terms of the required skillset, but players such as Oliver and Billy Mitchell illustrate the rich body of work that record-hunters can plunder.

It's unlikely Oliver's next record attempt will take place at the Galloping Ghost. Instead, you can expect it to occur under the gaze of a webcam broadcasting live to the Internet. "I love it, I love it, I love it," Oliver says. "It feels great to have people cheering you on, even if it's just a few. It really makes achieving a record feel more like a victory. I honestly believe it's helping revitalise the community on a fundamental level."

For Stoodley, broadcasting is part of his *Pac-Man* raison d'être: "[Livestreaming] is the very reason I only play in a live environment. It not only recreates the live play of the old arcade experience, but also acts as a tutorial. I never keep my gaming secret. It was an important part of playing in the arcades in the '80s: watching others play live and incorporating their strategies into your own repertoire."

Temple emphasises the unifying and educational aspects of arcade livestreams: "I think it's great and is definitely the future of competitive classic arcade gaming. There are no arcades any more to speak of, and the bulk of players are in the USA. Even there, getting the best players together at any one time is nigh on impossible. With the advent of streaming, anyone can watch at any time. I regularly get asked to dust the webcam down and stream some gameplay for players new to *Missile Command*."

Temple finds the pressure adds a vital spark: "It's a fear thing. I just don't want to look like a dickhead with all these people watching! No one wants a poor game when several thousand people are following around the world. But I like an audience [and] it ups my game, without question."

For Spriggs, YouTube was vital to building the modern community: "I am in constant contact with players from all over the world, and it's all down to YouTube. That was the first point of contact for many of us, and we connected and networked from there. If the 14-year-old me knew I was going to be in regular contact with the guys who wrote my favourite games, my head would have exploded."

Chien is the sole dissenter. While he appreciates streaming video's utility for learning, he prefers the solitude of just him and his *Donkey Kong* cab for score chasing. "Some people thrive on the adrenaline of having an audience watching them, but I feel I focus better alone. Since lots of people want to watch me play, I've gotten used to playing in front of an audience, and it's definitely more fun playing in public. But for serious games, I still prefer peace and quiet."

The arcade high-score scene is still very much alive in 2014. The vintage games it thrives on, as demanding as they are in terms of skill and endurance, are well suited to high-score chasing. Their simple, flexible systems offer players a chance to push further and further, and provide room for improvement even decades after their cabinets stopped being manufactured. From *Donkey Kong*'s deeper tricks, developed by decades of intense play, to exposing the logic underlying *Pac-Man*'s ghost patterns, it's a culture that's survived and grown through the adoption of new technologies. The majority of games being contested share a common thread: players who have spent decades playing them leading the way. But, as Chien proves, newcomers can make great strides forward by studying those who came before them.

"IT FEELS GREAT TO HAVE PEOPLE CHEERING YOU ON. IT MAKES ACHIEVING A RECORD FEEL MORE LIKE A VICTORY"

The top arcade players we talk to all agree that modern games are rarely suited to such feats. "There's a magic with something like *Missile Command*," Temple explains. "It produces panic, sweat and intensity, and from a simpler and smaller code footprint than something like *Super Meat Boy*. Given the disposable nature of console games today and the sheer number of new releases every year, even the good games are lost in the noise over time. That's not to say there aren't true classics released these days, but *GTAV* isn't going to be played in five years' time. It'll be yesterday's news to *GTAVI* or whatever."

Missile Command, *Donkey Kong*, *Pac-Man*, *Defender*, *Robotron* and the rest were born at the right time, it's true, but their real strength is they were never built to be beaten and never meant to stop swallowing credits. Modern games are designed to be finished and replaced, which means a once-standard open invitation to compete at the extremes of human hand-to-eye coordination and the very limits of the brain to process information has been lost. Why are players of games from 30 years ago still setting new score records for them? Their invitations to continue just keep on coming. ■



The King Of Kong, which focused on the 1981 coin-op, brought many new faces to the high-score scene, including Hank Chien



HSC

1,138,600

HANK CHIEN: DONKEY KONG

Hank Chien plays on an original *Donkey Kong* cabinet and notes that most of his records have been set when it's snowing. At home, he also loves *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Time Crisis* and the *Gran Turismo* series. During record attempts, he plays a 'max score' game involving a set of point-leeching techniques, some of which are "very low skill, mindless and not fun at all". His favourite technique is barrel grouping, where he jumps a set of barrels for points, then climbs down a ladder to jump them again.



— — —

3,331,540

JON STOODLEY: PAC-MAN

After getting into *Berzerk* in 1981, Stoodley took to *Pac-Man* in competition with his brother, rising to become the best player in the UK. He has an original Midway cabinet, but only practises before a live event. Pursuing the perfect game, he came as close as it gets: "I was perfect on board 255, with just the split screen to go. Unfortunately, after six hours and 30 minutes of gameplay, I made my only mistake at the beginning of that board and threw away the perfect game. Guys from around the world tuned in and the chat room was buzzing."



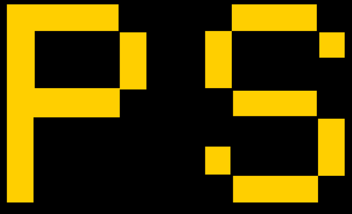
MDS

8,000,000 (APPROX)

MIKAEL LINDHOLM: DEFENDER

Lindholm is the *Defender* expert's *Defender* player and is recognised as the best in the world today. He first encountered *Defender* in 1981, aged 14. After becoming obsessed with taking the high score on all the machines he could find in Stockholm, he bought his own cabinet in 1985. He plays today on the same machine. Rather than shooting for world records, he's trying to clock the game at its hardest settings on the hardest ROMsets and posting videos of his progress to YouTube. Since 2010, his gaming time has been "98 per cent *Defender*".





35,000,000 (APPROX)

PAUL SPRIGGS: ROBOTRON

A Williams superfan, Spriggs first started with *Defender* in his local arcade before taking on *Robotron*. He maintains a global top-five position as a leading player of *Defender*, *Robotron* and *Stargate*. He played mostly in the arcades, but now uses MAME and a custom PlayStation stick. Fiercely dedicated, Spriggs helped set up the Williams Defender Players Unite Facebook group, which has a small but dedicated following, including developers Larry DeMar, Eugene Jarvis and Sam Dicker. He recently received an original *Robotron* ROM chip, signed by Jarvis.



L'EQUIPE EDITORIAL

For the first time, Ubisoft opens the door to its editors, who oversee all of its games

By Michael Gapper

Photography **Morgan Fache/Collectif Item**

























Serge Hascoet joined Ubisoft in 1987 as a designer and tester of sorts, working on *Iron Lord* and *Skateball* for the home computers of the day. Over his 27 years with the company, he has been a game designer and studio head, but today he shapes Ubisoft's creative direction as its chief creative officer and head of the editorial team. It was Hascoet who insisted that cutscenes were a redundant method of storytelling in the early '00s, Hascoet who mandated that every Ubisoft game should aim for 60fps, and Hascoet who is driving the company towards open worlds and systemic games as it transitions to a new generation of hardware. His contribution to games is immeasurable – not simply because of its enormity, but because he has sat for fewer than half-a-dozen interviews and is quick to direct the spotlight onto anyone else. He refuses to be photographed individually, and is only prepared to go on record for the sake of his staff.

"It's not for me, this interview," he says. "It's for the people here; they are working hard on games, but they are not known for what they do. For me, this is a way to help them be proud. Does that make sense? Besides, I'm not good enough [to make games myself]."

And yet Michel Ancel suggested in his biography that it was Hascoet who should be credited as France's Shigeru Miyamoto, not him. Before Hascoet worked on 1995's *Rayman*, which he counts as his first game, he had been credited on some 50 titles. "I was not coding. I was not a graphic artist. I was the guy giving some feedback about the design," he says. "I was at school when I first played Nintendo [games]. They are my masters; I love everything they do. [I believe] we're still at school and I think I have more to bring to the people [at Ubisoft] than to bring on one game. It's a big reward when people are happy to work with me."

For many years now, Hascoet has served as head of Ubisoft's editorial team, a group that's surprisingly invisible given its wide-ranging influence. The Parisian editors number just over 70 and oversee every aspect of the projects being executed by the 9,000 people making games at Ubisoft's global studios. Before the editorial team was established, games were given the green light by the publisher's executive management group, with Hascoet serving as a consultant. But since 2000, every facet of Ubisoft's creative direction has been guided by a collection of designers and producers who collaborate with the studios' directors from conception to shipping.

"Editorial's first function is knowledge," says IP development director **Tommy Francois**. "Editorial has three big [departments]. The first one, of course, is game design; we call them line designers. They all specialise in usability, accessibility and game design. Then we have line producers. In essence, they are more [the] planning and budget side. They usually come from production or QA or similar."

THE PARISIAN EDITORS OVERSEE EVERY ASPECT OF THE PROJECTS BEING MADE BY THE 9,000 PEOPLE ACROSS UBISOFT





***Rayman's* debut in 1995 represented a turning point for Ubisoft**

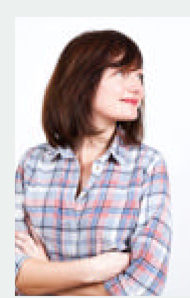


Elisabeth Pellen, writer of 2003 FPS *XIII* and a lead level designer on *King Kong*, oversees the line designers, while longtime project coordinator **Nicholas Schoener** is the man in charge of the team of line producers. Above them all are Hascoet and general director of worldwide production Christine Burgess-Quémard, who oversees budgets and studio management.

"The third prong, editorial creative services, is mine," Francois says. "The department is in charge of IP in general, and the types of profiles you'll find there are directors, writers, scriptwriters, ex-journalists, video editors; it's more on the creative side. We challenge [the teams] on innovation and quality. Now, that doesn't mean we are right, but we challenge them.

LEFT TO RIGHT **Victorien Franzini, associate line designer; Thomas Berneau, assistant line designer; Guillaume Gad, line producer; and Guillaume Woillez, line designer, collaborating on the editorial floor of one of Ubisoft's Parisian offices.** BELOW **Quentin Cucuel, project collaboration manager. The office space is open plan and filled with promotional materials**

FOCUS: DESIGN



Before joining editorial, Elisabeth Pellen spent 12 years at Ubisoft as a scriptwriter, level designer and creative director. Today she shapes the design direction of Ubisoft's games alongside CCO Serge Hascoet, managing editorial's line designers as online content director.

"Now that I work on the dark side of the Moon, I just try to help the dev team to reach the highest level of quality possible," she says. "When I joined editorial, before I became online content director, I started to work as a line designer, and I think line designers need to perceive the videogame industry with some distance."

The types of designers in Pellen's team range from old hands to graduates, and the latter's fresh eyes are considered valuable. Senior line designers bring more experience to the table, but moving to Paris's editorial team isn't considered a promotion for a designer or producer. "It's not a graduation," Pellen says. "When you work as a line designer, you don't receive the spotlight, and if the game achieves great success, it's never officially thanks to you. It's not so easy and it requires a very mature person. You need to fix your own objectives but you also need to find your own rewards. It requires a lot of autonomy and humility, and you need to respect the ownership. You can't [tell somebody to] design the level this way. You can't do the job instead of the guys making the game. When you come from production like me, it requires some adaptation.

"It requires some psychology and some communication skills to inspire those guys, but when I was in production, it was something that was really helpful. When you're lead level designer and you design 35 levels and you need to integrate more than 200 scripted events, [plus] you're a perfectionist and you care about the smallest details, sometimes you can forget why you're doing it. It's cool to have a line designer who tells you [where to focus your energy]. When it works that way, it's really cool."

Ubisoft's design directives include a push towards reality and multiplayer that's already evident in its biggest games, but in the future Pellen foresees a new dedication to pure creativity. "User-generated content will be more and more at the centre of the experience," she says. "I don't mean that we'll give players a level editor, but we'll let them express parts of their personality. *Might & Magic: Duel Of Champions* [was a success] thanks to Twitch more than to classic marketing… PC gaming is an inspiration for us, because PC is where the avant-garde is. But the new consoles have incorporated a lot of PC features, and it will be easier for players to communicate their personality through the games."

RIGHT ***Watch Dogs*****: a game Ubisoft's editorial team "backed from the start", right up to the point of delaying the game to ensure it shipped as its creators had intended.**
BELOW RIGHT ***The Division*****, whose arrival is expected before the end of 2014**

We try to understand that, as much as we are head office execs, we don't make the games."

Francois, a former journalist and producer at Shiny Entertainment, handles the very first stages of development. Ubisoft's studios mostly develop pitches internally before presenting to the editorial team, and ideas are batted between Francois' creative department and the studio in a series of kickoff meetings. It doesn't end there: Francois has flown to Malmö, Sweden, to meet with *The Division* creator Massive 40 times over the past four years, overseeing design and IP workshops that will shape Ubisoft's next major series.

"In terms of IP, we are a lot less experienced than Ubisoft and editorial as an entity," *The Division*'s executive producer **Fredrik Rundqvist** says. "That's where I think they have been extremely helpful, providing us with the tools and processes to come up with *The Division*. It's very rare that the majority of your interactions with the publisher are conversations about being innovative and maintaining quality, rather than *other topics*. The corporate cultures of the two companies [Ubisoft and Massive's previous publisher, Vivendi Games] are vastly different. Our main interaction with Ubisoft is with the editorial team, and there's a constant focus on invention and quality. Without talking specifically about our past, that's very different from the conversations that we used to have. Serge or Tommy or Elisabeth or Nicolas, they always… make quite an effort to empower us. It's our team, our project. It's our game.

"Just being constantly challenged and pushed to be more ambitious has actually been very helpful. Being able to tap into that vast pool of experience and best practices, and sharing knowledge with all the other studios, has been a real eye opener for us. I think Ubisoft has really taken us into the big leagues of development. It probably sounds like I've been told to say that, but I am 100 per cent sure that the quality of the game and the brand would be less without our interaction with editorial."

"I'm not being a business guy here," *Watch Dogs*' creative director **Jonathan Morin** says, also acknowledging possible scepticism, "but Ubisoft is not a company that is driven at first by business logic. It's why I'm still here after all these years. They're really good at [making money], but there's something more to it. The people I pitched *Watch Dogs* to, the editors, first and foremost are designers and they believed in *Watch Dogs*. [It wasn't] just, 'Oh my God, I can make a lot of money from it.'"

New game pitches, Hascoet says, can come from anywhere. "Sometimes it can come from teams, sometimes it's me, sometimes it's an MD… Everything is possible and there are no rules. *Assassin's Creed* [comes from a book] I





Nicolas Schoener is production coordination director for the editorial department and in charge of the line producers and production support team.

"I need people who have a large variety of skills," he says. "Line producers usually come in from being a producer on site, or from quality control and testing. I have one or two from a game design background and one from a licensing background. It's very diverse, but usually they're coming from production."

A producer for 16 years himself, Schoener is inclined to refer to Ubisoft's games as "products", and stresses the importance of its processes. "We have a strong organisation, which is used through the whole studios. We all speak the same language, [work to] the same milestones, [deal in] the same terminology.

"The advantage of making games in the past [when they were smaller] was agility – the ability to react very fast – and that's the one advantage we've tried to keep, even though today we have a very strong structure and a solid process that we apply to every production, whatever the format, genre and style. Basically, our process is simple from the beginning until the end. We have 'gates' – milestones during which a development team shows top management the result of their work – and they're crucial in the life of the project. We have a dozen rendezvous like this between management and the development team to decide how the product is evolving, and we can adjust the content, the business plan, the production, the staffing – every aspect."

While line producers and designers are involved in a game's production from the very beginning, it is, Schoener acknowledges, a role that receives less credit and glory than the in-house producers and designers. "It's a very different job being a line producer, or being a producer on site, of course," he says. "On site you lead a team and you produce something. Here we overview, prepare, we plan, [and] we structure everything. It's not just a matter of skills, because they basically all have the same skills. [The important part] after that is the sensibility of the person. Are they a hardcore gamer, a PC gamer, a casual gamer, a mobile gamer? You have personal interests and I try to take that into account, because I'm convinced that it works better when the personal affinity or taste of the person goes with the product they work on. It doesn't matter whether it's *Black Flag*, *Your Shape*, *Rayman* or whatever, we need the same skills, but the people are very different."

RAINBOW FIX

At Ubisoft, many projects are prototyped and then abandoned, with the lessons shared via editorial. But *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*, and *Rainbow 6: Patriots* were all announced and then totally reworked. How does a *Patriots* slip past editorial?

"That's life," Francois shrugs. "We looked at it and we were like, 'Shit. Good fantasy, but the game we're building is crap. We need to rework that.' I still think the pitch for *Patriots* was exciting; we all thought it was. We decided to unveil it, but we were struggling to make that game. It just wasn't fun to play when we were prototyping it. It's not just our call; it's the teams and us. [But] it's not the team's failure. Editorial failed to support them and take them in the right direction. We need to embrace it to learn from it."

"[We announced] because we're optimistic and we love to take risks, maybe?" says Hascoet, who seems more philosophical about the redesigns. "We'll all die one day, that's for sure. Because we are still alive, we can still try to make things better. We always hope for the best."

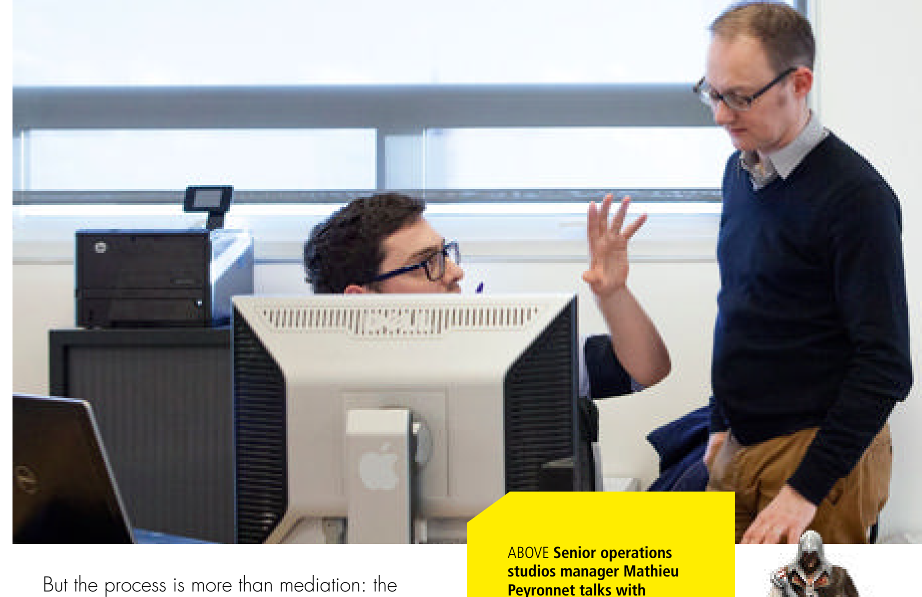
love: [Vladimir Bartol's] Alamut. I gave it to Patrice Désilets and it was an inspiration. They were doing the next *Prince Of Persia*; then, with the book, they created *Assassin's Creed*."

In *The Division*'s case, editorial had wanted to make a Tom Clancy-based MMORPG for many years before the right studio came along. "We had a team that always aspired to do an RPG," Rundqvist says, "and then we had a new publisher with a real need for a studio that could help them pursue their dream."

After a successful pitch, Francois' team will pose questions to the developers and dream up possible solutions. Take *The Division*, for instance: making a near-future MMORPG has inherent thematic constraints. "When you hit level 99, you don't get a rain of fire [spell]," Francois says. "Who is your boss? It can't be a monster on Mount Doom. What does your tank look like?"

Worse, attaching it to the Clancy universe throws up continuity questions. "We're in Tom Clancy's New York, right? So where is Sam Fisher? Where is Rainbow Six and Ghost Recon? We were like, 'Are we fucking up Clancy? Are we creating discrepancies for Clancy fans?'" Those questions will be answered, we're told.

For *The Division*, the editorial team helped with research – Massive is now on its sixth fact-finding mission to New York – and liaised with FEMA and other experts to help the developers tap their expertise for its pandemic scenario.



ABOVE **Senior operations studios manager Mathieu Peyronnet talks with Nicolas Schoener. Editorial is primarily run from one floor and only the testing department occupies its own space, where locals are invited in under strict nondisclosure agreements**

But the process is more than mediation: the editors will argue design and writing decisions with the development team in meetings, with a professional moderator from outside the company ensuring everyone is speaking on the same level. In a project's earliest days, the editors and development team also spend three days at a rented chateau – "I know, that sounds awfully bourgeoisie," Francois says – without mobile phones, talking with each other all day and playing board games at night. It's all about building a level of trust and co-operation.

"If you're in production and you're talking to me, you're like, 'Do we have a good relationship with him? Do I trust him? Will he break my game?'" Francois says. "I can help you, but I'm still [from] head office, so it's about building a relationship with the people, about respect. The more transparent and open you are, the better it will be."

Before that meeting, every Ubisoft game is assigned at least one line designer and line producer, who will oversee the project from Paris. But perhaps the most curious aspect of Ubisoft's editorial department is that joining it isn't considered a promotion. A line designer in Paris is no more senior than a game designer in Montreal, and a line producer commands no more respect than their counterparts working in-house on *The Division*. Some line designers come fresh from university, others are ten-year veterans, and others still are longtime hands-on designers on sabbatical from their usual studio.

"I recruit [line designers] from the best design schools," Pellen says. "I also ask them to have a great knowledge about games, so I try to hire [established] game designers and programmers. I try to find guys with a strong personality who are also good listeners. The role of the line designers is to communicate the editorial guidelines to the creative directors and lead game designers, but before you do that, it's important to listen and respect the ownership and understand the vision."

Those editorial guidelines include a push towards open-world systemic design and a focus on online elements, even in singleplayer games. "We are pushing hard to go to open world, mainly," Hascoet says. "This is the best way to let the player express himself. I have a hard time with linear games – mission after mission after mission. I understand [it can be good]. *The Last Of Us* is great, but it's not where we want to go.

"I know it's not always obvious in our games, but my main [goal] is to let the player express [themselves]. I'm more about the systemic stuff than the narrative stuff. It's not that obvious when you play *Assassin's Creed*, but we are going in that direction. *Far Cry 3* is a good [step

"WE ARE PUSHING HARD TO GO TO OPEN WORLD, MAINLY. THIS IS THE BEST WAY TO LET THE PLAYER EXPRESS HIMSELF"



F O C U S : **I N T E L L E C T U A L P R O P E R T Y**



Tommy Francois took a long and wending career path before accepting his role as Ubisoft's IP director, taking in journalism at Canal+, game production with Shiny, and manager at MTV's GameOne channel. He joined Ubisoft in 2006 and today is the first port of call when work begins on a new game.

"Our motto is to try to make the best videogames in the world. There's no secret sauce to doing that, and we have a process that's a framework, but it's there to be bent," he explains. "Each creation is organic and different, comprised of different humans, problems, themes, and [interactivity]…"

The process begins with creative workshops designed to flesh out the game's design and world, which take place outside of the office at venues arranged by French seminar specialist Chateu Form. "We go there for three days," Francois says. "And the producer, creative director, art director, scriptwriter, game director, game design, lead game design – people like that – all attend. Execs don't have more power in a workshop. It's about everyone's opinion. Good ideas don't come from the [top]; they can come from anywhere. IP development is about finding the identity of a project. If it's not finding it, then it's creating it, or supporting it, or enhancing it and showing it in games. It might be surprising to you to think that inside Ubisoft at some point we were like, What the fuck is *Far Cry*?'"

After thrashing out the initial character of a game, Francois' team aims to keep that identity focused. His staff will step in to produce trailers and art if asked to by the production team, and help with brand extensions such as comic books and novels. "As much as we are head office, I prefer to be a service," he says. "Someone's going to think about what *The Division* means in book form. What does it mean in movie form? Someone has to think about that, but you're busy making the game, so let us think about that.

"It's funny, the editorial thing. A lot of people think our job is [to say], 'Do this; implement that.' That would never happen. If you don't agree on something, your heart is not going to be in it. That's just the process of creation in any media form. Even in a band, you start off with a riff, and by the end you work together to make a song. It's being creative. It's working together and seeing what the opportunities are."

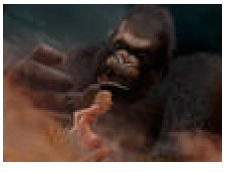
toward that], and we worked a lot with the team during the process. What I work on most with the team is to always respect the player and have them create their own story, instead of being forced to live the story written by a creative."

Another directive insists that a game's context be grounded in reality, the odd *Raving Rabbids* or *Child Of Light* aside. It could be a past, present or near-future reality, Pellen explains, but Ubisoft's editorial department likes games to draw inspiration from the real world. That would seemingly prohibit Ubisoft from ever making its own *Mass Effect* or *Final Fantasy*, but Pellen believes otherwise. "Yes, we could do a *Mass Effect* or a fantasy game, but supported with our pillars. Cloverfield is a perfect example. It's so real when the creature appears on the screen." District 9 is another example of fantasy grounded by reality, she says. The key difference is that the fantastic feels real.

Those pillars have changed over the years, though. "The guideline on [*Peter Jackson's*] *King Kong* was: 'You have nine months to work on the game and it should be released at the same time as the movie,'" Pellen laughs. Today, Ubisoft's machine runs far more smoothly. "The modern [creative direction] is a mix between what went well on our own games and what we observe from our competitors. We play a lot of different games. We work with consumer marketing and knowledge, with the data analysts…. plus our own intuitions, our feelings, something not rational that I can't describe to you."

The editors don't always agree, either, and the guidelines shift as the thinking changes. An "angry discussion" with Serge Hascoet about playing as the hero in *Assassin's Creed* – "I don't want to be Ezio," says Pellen, "I want to be an assassin myself and be part of the guild" – has dictated a new focus on player identity in *The Division* and *The Crew*, for instance. And the two-way design process means new editorial directives often emerge from game developers themselves. "I think [the always-online thing] was





***Peter Jackson's King Kong*: rescued by smart design and crunch**

influenced by us," Rundqvist says. "That's the way we've always worked, and I think we've been very influential in that aspect. I think maybe it's one of the reasons why Ubisoft bought the studio to start with: the experience and the multiplayer knowledge that we could bring to the group."

Meanwhile, some ideas are simply considered good practice and have propagated among Ubisoft's games. Francois points to the viewpoints in *Assassin's Creed*, which have, one way or another, found their way into *Far Cry 3* and *Watch Dogs*. "Right now, it's the way we've found at Ubisoft for players to understand the content that's there," he says.

While Pellen has half a dozen directives for teams, production chief Schoener has only one: "A good job for our department is to ship the game on the right date and at the required quality. That's the mandate."

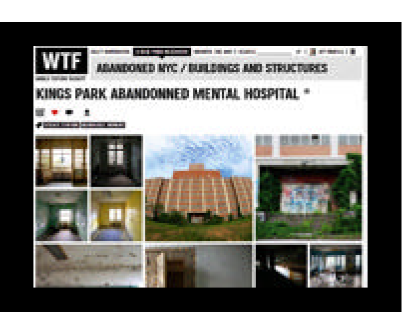
A 16-year veteran producer at Ubisoft, Schoener heads up editorial's line designers and production support team, which oversees localisation, certification and quality control. His team's job is daunting: coordinating work and budgets on games made by upwards of 1,000 people spread across up to four continents. "The line producers act like a hub," he explains. "The important part of their job is to gather and structure all those thousands of information sources into something manageable.

"We decide, [via] many different criteria, which studios will work on which product, depending on their skills. Then we bring them together and we set up a specific structure for the collaboration. We have dedicated associate producers [at studios] who lead the collaboration. It's a network of those people. It's 24/7

WTF

IP director Tommy Francois was responsible for the development of Ubsoft's internal WTF tool – officially called World Texture Facility, if not colloquially known as such – a web app available on Ubisoft's servers that catalogues every piece of data accumulated by a project and organises it into a clear and readable format. Its front page looks like Pinterest, complete with Like buttons and comment boxes. If you're working on *The Division*, for instance, and you want to see how people dress in a New York winter, there's a category for clothes filled with photos the team took on its Christmas research trip.

"Being creatively mature doesn't mean we don't use references," Francois says. "So we have this dynamic tool where the team uploads everything to be shared across the studio. We always used to do the research, but nobody has time to see it on a production team because we're always running late. People can't read a 500-page Powerpoint on the American Revolution, and we can only take a few people on these research trips, so we needed a way to share that data."



A gathering of developers from the editorial team and a rare photograph of Serge Hascoet (seventh from left). The team numbers around 70 in total, but it's rare for all of them to be in the office at once, with so many away visiting studios or video conferencing

"I WANT US TO BE BETTER THAN NINTENDO, ROCKSTAR, VALVE AND BLIZZARD. THAT'S ALL I WANT"

synchronisation. We have specific processes for HD games and another one for free-to-play, but it's more and more the same milestones."

All Ubisoft's games are subject to regular milestone meetings, attended by their developers and line producers, designers and IP developers. "The line producers are in charge of applying our process to their games," Schoener says. "We call it the Stage Gate process. It's a series of milestones when the development teams must deliver elements, but our studios have the usual development methodologies, [such as] scrum and agile. They choose the one that works for them."

Early in the process, a game's developers will produce a 'first publishable playable' (FPP) build of the game, a vertical slice that demonstrates key mechanics and upon which key decisions will be based. "There are certainly times when we don't agree [in the milestone meetings]," Rundqvist says. "But we have a saying here at Massive: we want the game to decide what's right." Massive's first presentation to editorial was a playable prototype focused on tech and it sold the editors on the game. "Ideally," Schoener notes, "the FPP will be running on the target platform too. After that, [we] come with the recommendation [for the budget and timeline], and usually Serge, Christine and Yves [Guillemot] are involved in the decision."

This is how new games are born at the publisher, and while Ubisoft isn't the only large company to share its knowledge and divide production between studios, its methods are its own and its executive authority is small. "We're really lucky at Ubisoft," *Watch Dogs*' writer **Kevin Shortt** says. "The company's done this before. All those big games were built from the ground up, so we often reached out for help, but in the end nothing's ever forced on us."

In a machine with 9,000 moving parts, studios are given enough autonomy that the work of Ubisoft Montreal is clearly distinguishable from Montpellier's or Toronto's. It was pride in its staff's work that saw Ubisoft announce *Watch Dogs* before the specs of PS4 and Xbox One were even finalised. That same pride also saw it announce *Rainbow Six: Patriots* too early. The system isn't perfect, but it is quite human.

"I speak about people because they are the most important [factor]," Hascoet says. "I think they could work without us, because they are talented; they are good, very good, some of the best. But we are here because we can help. We can share what can help the teams to get better. Maybe everybody can say people are the most important thing, but I feel it strongly. Truly. We are here to help the team and support the team instead of hinder or hurt them. We are really at the start. We have everything to do. I want us to be better than Nintendo, Rockstar, Valve and Blizzard. That's it. That's all I want." ■

FOCUS: TESTING



Ubisoft's Parisian usability testing department is a new addition to editorial, and set away from the rest of the team in its own building behind several locked doors. Here, **Audrey Laurent-André** and **Sebastien Odasso** run a 19-strong team of designers and researchers who study players' habits in in-development games.

Ubisoft's studios will typically have their own testing departments, too, but Paris likes to keep this small unit close for its own reference. "The mission of the line designers and producers is to help the teams make better games. I think it's important for them to be able to see firsthand what happens with the players," Odasso says. "Usability tests have been done at Ubisoft since 2001. Since then, we've been constantly improving our methodologies. When I arrived six years ago in the games lab, we were five or six strong. In six years, we've tripled or quadrupled the number of people in the team."

Odasso's background is in neurophysiology and product testing, while Laurent-André is a designer and programmer who left the Enjmin game design school with a master's degree in 2011. Together, they and the team build processes to answer questions posed by editorial. "Everything starts with the editorial team saying, 'Yeah, I'm not sure about this thing; check if this works,'" Laurent-André says. "We try to have one person who will follow the project all the time. For instance, we will have one coordinator who is going to run all of the tests of *The Division* and *Assassin's Creed*, and he's able to follow the differences between versions and have a good understanding of what the team wants to know. The deeper the knowledge on the project, the more efficient the methodology on it."

"Most of our feedback isn't really on the design decisions in the game," Odasso says. "It's what we call usability. Does the player know what he has to do? Where he has to go? Does he know the controls, and can he do the things that he has to do? Does he see and understand the tutorial?

"Even if we're part of the editorial structure, our playtest reports can help the team make decisions. A boss that's too hard to beat will [yield a report] identifying some causes and some suggestions. The team can, if they want, put them in action with the report. Everyone has our report; everyone has our findings. I think it's a brilliant part of game design, even if it's not game design itself."

THE MAKING OF...



SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

How ideas new and old were blended to bridge the gap between Mario's past and present

By Chris Schilling

Format Wii U
Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD Tokyo)
Origin Japan
Release 2013

No tea tables were upended – as a Nintendo euphemism for radical changes towards the end of a game's development goes – during the making of *Super Mario 3D World*. Since 2005's *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat*, Nintendo EAD Tokyo has blossomed into one of the publisher's finest assets, and it says much for the regard with which the group is held that **Shigeru Miyamoto** and fellow Nintendo veteran Takashi Tezuka felt comfortable taking a back seat, their responsibilities limited to "occasional spot checks". The two designers of the original *Super Mario Bros* could rest easy: their most famous creation was in safe hands.

The mandate presented to Nintendo's elite development team was clear. Its aim, according to Miyamoto, was "to make a 3D home console *Super Mario* game that people who like the *New Super Mario* games can also enjoy". In other words, to forge a stronger link between Mario's two-dimensional obstacle courses and his more expansive 3D adventures. And not only in design terms, you suspect, but also to bridge the sales gap between the two.

Plans were set in motion after *Super Mario Galaxy 2* was completed. "We decided we should make an entirely new title, rather than another in the *Galaxy* series," co-director **Koichi Hayashida** says. "Up until that point, we had only been working on games for the home console, so you might expect that we'd go on to develop a game for Wii U. In fact, we got really interested in creating a 3D *Mario* game that could be played with the 3D effect of 3DS. That's why we chose to develop for the handheld system instead. Saying that, though, at that same point we also planned on making a version for Wii U. So, in that sense, you could say the game was in development for over three years."

Hayashida admits that Nintendo may have had to reconsider its approach had *Super Mario 3D Land* been a failure. But the critical and commercial success of Mario's 3DS debut encouraged the company to stay its course. With the help of Nintendo subsidiary 1-Up Studio (formerly known as Brownie Brown, which worked on the likes of *Mother 3* and *Heroes Of Mana*), the largest development team in EAD Tokyo's history began work on its Wii U spiritual sequel. And with the core concept established at a very early stage, there was plenty of time for experimentation.



***3D World*'s co-op is a subtle innovation, but its inclusion altered this 3D *Mario* game in ways a GamePad never could**

Indeed, the finished product bears the hallmarks of an eclectic approach to game design, one actively encouraged by the policies of co-director and team leader **Kenta Motokura**. Over 100 staff members were asked to come up with ideas, from throwaway gimmicks to entire level concepts, which were then displayed across dozens of Post-it notes stuck to the studio's walls. So perhaps it's little wonder *3D World* sometimes feels generous to a fault, introducing ideas before throwing them away minutes later.

"WE ALL TRIED DOUBLE MARIO AND IT WAS REALLY AMUSING, SO WE SCRAMBLED TO READJUST THE GAME"

"We discussed and discarded a huge number of ideas during development," Motokura says. "Sometimes you just can't tell if an idea is good or bad by looking at it on the drawing board; when this happens, we try it out in-game. If we don't find the idea fun, it won't make it into the final product. There was a lot of back and forth on the course designs due to this."

That sense of restlessness is pronounced in *3D World* with its myriad asides, which range from the rapid-fire thrill of the Mystery Houses to the puzzle-led Adventures Of Captain Toad levels, the latter having been particularly warmly received. "We thought they were a lot of fun, so we're really glad everyone likes them too," says Hayashida. "If enough fans express such enthusiasm, we'd consider doing something with this feature in future." It's tempting to suggest that the rise in popularity of the quick-fix gaming offered by smartphones may have been an inspiration, but it's a comparison that Motokura is quick to dismiss. "They weren't inspired by smartphone games. The idea was to design a game that would become even more fun as you play through it, and this influenced the pace of the game, effectively increasing the rhythm. We felt that a short challenge with quick results would be a good motivation for players to advance onto the next course."

Producer **Yoshiaki Koizumi** chips in: "We do feel a need to keep delivering games that will surpass our audience's expectations. As creators, we try to fill our games with as many unique elements as possible. Moving into the future, we want to continue to deliver even more surprises as fast as we can so that it never feels like there aren't enough."

Despite having such a vast pool of ideas to draw from, one of *3D World*'s very best notions came about by happy accident. The Double Cherry power-up was conceived when one of the level designers accidentally added an extra character model into one of the courses. "We ended up with a single player being able to control two versions of Mario at the same time!" Motokura recalls. "We all tried it and it was really amusing, so we scrambled to readjust the game so that this feature would make it into the final product. If the game had locked up with two identical characters on the level, I don't think we would have the double Mario feature we have now!"

While the Double Cherry was a latecomer, the Super Bell that allows Mario and company to adopt feline form was introduced nearer the start of development, becoming the signature feature of a game overloaded with playful touches. As with many of the best Nintendo designs, it was simply the most elegant solution to an existing problem, or in this case two: the director's desire to allow Mario to climb walls, and to provide a way to help novices clear high obstacles. "We wanted Mario to make use of not only the ground but other surfaces, which is what led us to this idea," Motokura says. "At roughly the same time, we were looking at ideas for more exciting ways for players to run around the courses. One of the things we investigated was having characters scamper around on [all ▶

fours]. For both movement styles, the test characters were either a normal-looking Mario or a version with a slight difference in colour. In finally putting all this together into a new Mario ability, we felt that a cat ticked all the boxes… For the final design, we strove to make it as cat-like as possible, while keeping it clearly distinct from [*3D Land*'s] Tanooki Mario."

Cat Mario also represented another answer to an ancient problem – that of combat within the context of a 3D platform game. Leaping onto enemies' heads in two dimensions might not be a issue for most players, but that doesn't hold true for 3D. It's a balance that Nintendo has wrestled with for some time, as Hayashida explains: "[This] is why you had the punch in *Super Mario 64* and the 360-degree spin attack in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Since *Super Mario 3D Land*, though, with the 3D effect, jumping on enemies has become a lot easier, but we still decided to add in the claw attack to give Cat Mario an advantage. Then, of course, there's Rosalina, the unlockable character for this game, who can perform a spin attack without needing a transformation. I think, when playing as her, you're really able to feel the difference in playstyles."

Yet if the five playable characters offer a range of abilities – Toad's running speed makes him ideal for time attacks, while Peach's floaty jump acts as a built-in difficulty modulator – the stages were seemingly designed with only one skillset in mind. "If a course is fun to play as Mario, then generally speaking it will also be fun to play using the other characters as well," Hayashida says.

But the plumber handles differently from his other home console incarnations, the absence of a triple jump being a notable omission. Its exclusion stemmed from a desire to hark back to the simplicity of older *Mario* games. "Back when we were discussing the character abilities for *Super Mario 3D Land*," Motokura says, "we thought about what was the simplest bit of fun that could be had using Mario's regular abilities. We decided it was jumping across a series of platforms without falling – think back to the doughnut blocks and rotating platform courses in previous games. This decision helped us make comparatively intricate courses for *Super Mario 3D Land* and *3D World*. In contrast, in a game like *Super Mario 64*, I think the fun needs to be on a slightly larger scale, hence why the triple jump worked so well there. It's not that one ability is better than the other, it's just that we use ones that best fit the design of the game."

Losing 3DS's stereoscopic effect and its aid to depth perception proved challenging, though, despite Hayashida's admissions that it was also the root of the biggest hurdles during development of the 3DS title. "With *Super Mario 3D Land*, we developed the game with the premise of having the 3D effect, but we also had to make sure the game was still fun to play when this effect was turned off; that made things much more difficult. Through a lot of tweaking, I think we managed to make a game that's also fun to play even without using the 3D feature. We took the lessons we learned here and used them in making *Super Mario 3D World*."

Further complicating matters, Nintendo's team wanted to accommodate four players simultaneously for *3D World*. "We had to make sure none of the players would feel left out, even if all four players are moving in different directions," Hayashida says. "We combined multiple types of camera movements that would adjust to the layout or a given feature in the courses. It was a lot of work setting all this up!"

Miyamoto's presence was felt at a macro level, but even so he directed the *3D Land* and *World* team to tackle problems it might rather have skipped. "We used the Goal Pole in *Super Mario 3D Land*, but it was quite a challenge for us," Hayashida says. "We tentatively asked Mr Miyamoto if we could change this, but he was pretty sure that the Goal Pole is a staple of *Mario* games. It's definitely a clear marker, and is easily visible even from afar."

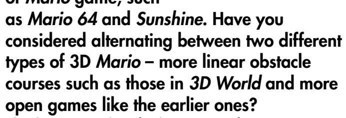
Its blend of old and new earned *Super Mario 3D World* universal acclaim, even if it was criticised for being a poor showcase of its host console's features. "We always try to keep our 3D *Mario* games both highly intuitive and readily accessible," Motokura says. "We designed this game so that the players could really sink into it and clear all the courses without having to read lots of text or deal with difficult controls, whether playing by themselves or with others. However, if we were to make another game then we might need to make even more use of the GamePad."

"For *Super Mario 3D Land*, we strove to integrate the best elements of 2D *Mario* games into a 3D *Mario* game," Koizumi says. "In a sense, you can also say that we created *Super Mario 3D World* by rethinking traditional *Mario* game ideas. In addition to doing this, we went all out inserting elements [that allow] players to further enjoy the sprawling environments. There's still a lot more room for discovery and invention, and we'll continue to propose new and exciting game mechanics going into the future."

Whether that will involve Toad, Luigi and company remains to be seen, but it may have to. After all, now we've had a home console 3D *Mario* with fourplayer co-op, it could be hard to justify a singleplayer-only outing. But will the team's adventures continue on 3DS or Wii U? "That's still a secret!" Koizumi laughs. "I can tell you, though, that we've already started approaching our next challenge." ■

Q&A

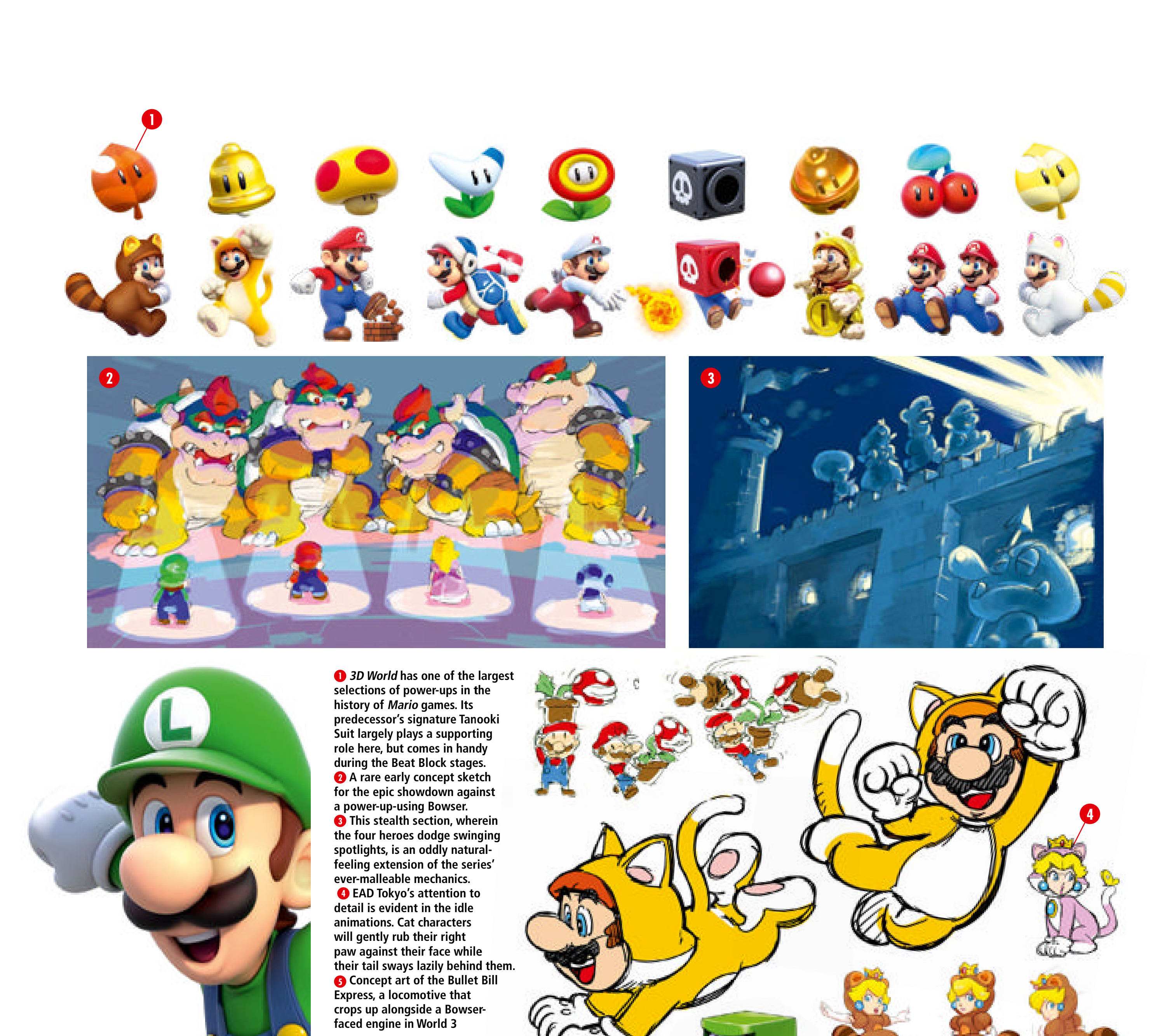
Kenta Motokura
Co-director, Nintendo EAD Tokyo



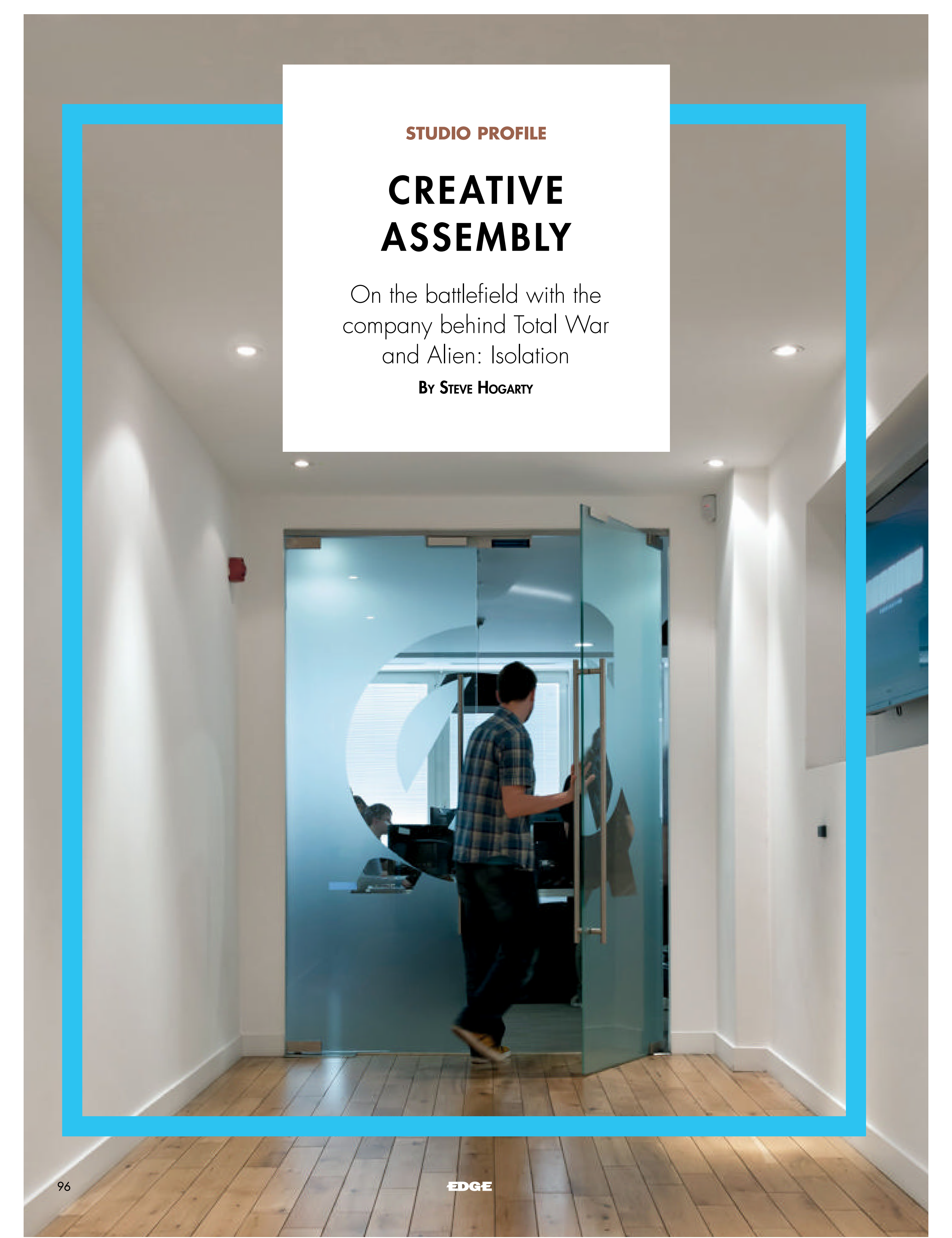
Some people would like a return to a more 'sandbox' style of *Mario* game, such as *Mario 64* and *Sunshine*. Have you considered alternating between two different types of 3D *Mario* – more linear obstacle courses such as those in *3D World* and more open games like the earlier ones?
The basic goal or feel we strive for is pretty established. Having said that, it doesn't stop us from including elements such as searching for Green Stars or Stamps, or reimagining other fun ideas from past *Mario* games such as *Super Mario 64*. Although I think the fundamentals of *Mario* games – running and jumping around in a 3D world – will probably remain constant, there's still a lot of room to deliver the most exciting product we can think of.

There are several unusual new character and enemy types in this game – which are your favourite newcomers?
We really poured our hearts and souls into making each one. That said, my personal favourite is Plessie. He's got the same kind of adorable features as Yoshi, with all the fun of being able to hop on his back with your friends and ride through the course together. I think we'll be seeing more of him in the future. As for the enemies, King Ka-Thunk is my favourite. His design is a perfect union of movement and attack.

You've said in the past that there will be no DLC for *3D World*, but surely the Mystery Houses would work well as a series of downloadable challenges?
Thank you. We're really grateful for this feedback, and we will consider revisiting these in the future.



❶ *3D World* has one of the largest selections of power-ups in the history of *Mario* games. Its predecessor's signature Tanooki Suit largely plays a supporting role here, but comes in handy during the Beat Block stages.
❷ A rare early concept sketch for the epic showdown against a power-up-using Bowser.
❸ This stealth section, wherein the four heroes dodge swinging spotlights, is an oddly natural-feeling extension of the series' ever-malleable mechanics.
❹ EAD Tokyo's attention to detail is evident in the idle animations. Cat characters will gently rub their right paw against their face while their tail sways lazily behind them.
❺ Concept art of the Bullet Bill Express, a locomotive that crops up alongside a Bowser-faced engine in World 3



STUDIO PROFILE

CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

On the battlefield with the company behind Total War and Alien: Isolation

By Steve Hogarty

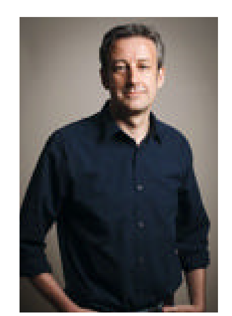
There's a rule in warfare, one so obvious that Sun Tzu didn't even bother jotting it down, that having a really big cannon earns you a certain degree of respect. Governments may rise and fall, monarchs will be born, wave at people for a bit and then lose their heads, but an army with massive guns tends to be afforded a degree of respectful autonomy.

For almost 15 years, The Creative Assembly has been piecing together its own superweapon, digging trenches in the PC realtime strategy genre with the popular *Total War* series. Since *Shogun: Total War*'s debut in 2000, the series has notched up eight historical battle simulators, and these have established a niche in a market that had previously been inaccessible to Creative Assembly's paymaster, Sega, which acquired the UK studio in 2005.

"Life as an independent developer is brutal and often quite short," says **Mike Simpson**, creative director and proud captain of the *Total War* monolith, who joined the team in the mid-'90s, when the studio was just five men. Creative Assembly has since grown to employ over 300 staff and is now cleanly split into two teams, with one continuing work on *Total War* and the other busy developing *Alien: Isolation*. "Having a major publisher as a backer takes that problem away," Simpson explains, "and it means you can afford to be a little bit more adventurous to some extent, so that's the upside. The downside is that you have a boss to feed, which you didn't have before. I think the two things balance out. I'd much rather be part of a publishing group than a sole developer again."

"We like to be quite independently minded. We always have been," adds studio head **Tim Heaton**, who began managing Creative Assembly five years ago, after leaving EA Partners. "I don't think that independence disappeared from CA when Sega came along. Arguably, that independence has grown, because we've built marketing teams within CA. Less and less do we need that central set of typical publisher roles that they used to provide."

The studio's spiritual sovereignty in its dealings with Sega's warm monetary embrace took some hammering out, however, with Creative Assembly's initial forays into multiplatform projects post-takeover getting a relatively tepid reception. Action-adventure *Total War* spinoff *Spartan: Total Warrior* (2005) and follow-up *Viking: Battle For Asgard* (2008) failed to reach the same critical heights as its world-class strategy games. "*Viking* was flawed because it ran out of time," says Heaton. "Sega wanted it out. It came out on the last day of the financial year, and that's never a good sign. One of the things that I was keen to do [after *Viking*] was to open a dialogue with Sega. We started to have proper conversations about not being forced to make compromises that are bad decisions in the medium- to longterm."





Creative Assembly's studio director, Tim Heaton (left). Jude Bond is lead artist on the recently unveiled *Alien: Isolation*

It was those lukewarm early Sega projects, as well as the demonstrably popular strategy series tucked up its sleeve, that would eventually give Creative Assembly the backbone to stand up to its owner. "It was a learning curve," says Heaton, himself an integral liaison between his studio and Sega. In fact, after THQ sold off *Company Of Heroes* developer Relic to Sega early in 2013, Heaton visited the freshly acquired studio to tutor it on how to work with its new parent. "It was only really when I went through that process [with Relic] that I realised how idiosyncratic and odd and 'special case' these types of things are," Heaton says. "So, yes, a key part of the success of our studio is in how we relate to Sega and work with Sega's priorities, but also with our own priorities, too."

"I WOULD WORK ON THINGS LIKE A 400-POLYGON STADIUM, WHICH SHOWS HOW MUCH THINGS HAVE CHANGED"

Alongside other projects,

Creative Assembly is now developing *Alien: Isolation*, a terrifying, single-alien take on the survival-horror genre and perhaps the most reverential and accomplished use of Sega's prized license in over a decade. For such a project to arrive at, and flourish under, Creative Assembly is evidence that its relationship is healthy.



Founded 1987
Employees 300
Key staff Tim Ansell (founder), Tim Heaton (studio director), Mike Simpson (creative director, *Total War*), Jude Bond (lead artist, *Alien: Isolation*)
URL www.creative-assembly.com
Selected softography *Shogun: Total War, Rome: Total War, Viking: Battle For Asgard*
Current projects *Total War: Arena, Alien: Isolation*

Jude Bond is lead artist on the specially constructed console team placed in charge of *Alien: Isolation*. His tenure at Creative Assembly goes as far back as the pre-*Total War* days, when the studio primarily worked on porting EA Sports titles to PC. "I came here in '98 or '99 – a very long time ago," he says. "I started off making environment art for the EA Sports games we were working on at the time. I would work on things like making a 400-polygon stadium, which really shows how much things have changed."

The team built for *Alien: Isolation* is made up of over 100 people. Many have been drafted in from all corners of the industry, but essentially, as Heaton explains, the team is built around a core of old-school studio veterans. Situated on an entirely different floor from the 160-strong *Total War* team, it's almost treated as a studio within a studio. "It's very much like two studios in one, really," says Heaton. "We divide them quite hard, and that's because we want focus. They're very different teams. *Total War* is super deep, very intellectually strong. They've been making that game for over 14 years now, so it's our real heavyweight team.

"For the *Alien: Isolation* team, it's kind of built out of a core staff that we already had, but we [made it] so that it feels younger and more dynamic. The *Alien: Isolation* team is full of people who have made triple-A games before, but not necessarily within the Creative Assembly way of working. So it's a lot more agile, a bit more rock and roll, I think it's fair to say."

But there's another way of looking at both teams, says Simpson, one that challenges the impression that the *Alien: Isolation* team was conjured out of thin air. "There were always





Part of Heaton's job (left) is to act as an intermediary between Sega and Creative Assembly, ensuring the studio isn't put in the position it was with ***Viking: Battle For Asgard***. A designer at work on ***Total War*** (above). The series' polish buys the studio leeway for creative risks

two teams," Simpson explains, "so it's not like we created a separate one for *Alien: Isolation*. In fact, you could argue that the console team is the original CA and the *Total War* team was the offshoot. That was the situation back in the day. Creative Assembly started off doing sports games for EA. That's the heritage, so in that sense there's always been an action game team."

Regardless of which team can claim to be closer to the beating heart of Creative Assembly, the *Total War* and *Alien: Isolation* developers are strictly walled off from each other. "The teams are spread geographically as well," Heaton explains. "They're on two different floors so they can concentrate on what they're trying to do.

"There's a danger when you're trying to do big triple-A games that you constantly rob Peter to pay Paul. 'Oh, we need an *Alien: Isolation* programmer; maybe we could just take that guy for a couple of months', or whatever, and that always diminishes the other team. There's always going to be a lead team working on the next game, so it's nice to be able to just go: 'You're not allowed to cross that boundary'."

Evolving from just a tiny handful of developers to hosting and managing two large and discrete teams naturally brought about some growing pains, but with that expansion came lessons in how to properly grow a studio. To form in 1987 and continue to thrive well into a third decade is a clear indicator that Creative Assembly has been doing something right for a long time.

"I've worked with people like Crytek and some of the leading developers back at EA," says Heaton. "There are always flaws in all of those developers' outlooks, but the ones that are successful are the ones that have quality built in. Those are the ones that have survived through all the changes. I recognised it at CA when I came and saw everything. It's really important."

"From an art perspective," Bond adds, "a lot of that has got to do with who we actually employ and who our staff are. I think we're quite happy to employ people who have raw artistic talent. It's not about technique or knowing pipelines, because we can teach all of that. It's much easier to teach that than it is to teach someone to draw or understand art."

Heaton agrees. He attributes Creative Assembly's longevity partly to its hiring policy. "A brilliant employee is worth ten to a hundred times more than a 'solid' employee, so it's worth hiring those people. Sometimes those people have expectations that are hard to manage, but that helps differentiate us.

"There's also the danger that every time you change something on a large scale, there's risk involved, so we try to balance the risk and the reward. But I think it's much better to be ambitious and fall short occasionally rather than rest on our laurels and not try to do anything clever at all, so we're constantly pushing forward."

Alien: Isolation has benefitted from precisely the same risk-embracing attitude to development, sidestepping the templated tropes that have dogged Alien games for years. Bond explains how creating an engine freed the team from many technical constraints, and in doing so unlocked the ability to create the lighting techniques so crucial to its atmosphere.

"I THINK IT'S BETTER TO BE AMBITIOUS AND FALL SHORT OCCASIONALLY RATHER THAN REST ON OUR LAURELS"

"And when you have an outlook on life that's as strong as CA's, where you're joining a team that have been making games for 14 years, then we can kind of imprint some of the principles that we want onto these brilliant people and allow them to do that free radical thinking with us."

In one sense, *Total War* is keeping an increasingly ambitious Creative Assembly tethered to the ground. When looking to advance the game that still defines the studio, it's cautious about tinkering with the formula, but that doesn't mean it shies away from change.

"We try to do different things on each *Total War* game," Simpson says. "One of the things we're very keen not to do is just stagnate and produce the same game over and over again, so we make sure that there's a lot of differences between each subsequent game.

"We've got really, really good tech for lighting, which I don't think anyone else has. Light and shade is so important to the gameplay… If we'd been using an off-the-shelf package, or were just porting it onto a different engine, we would have been constrained."

Total War is the loudest gun in Creative Assembly's armoury, the big stick with which the studio has fought for its independence. And now it's that ability to work without constraint that directly fuels its next big project. You'd be hard pressed to corner the studio into summarising its thinking so succinctly itself, though.

"We're British," Heaton says. "We're quite pragmatic, so we don't have dicky mission statements. We just keep trying to make good games. Sometimes that's hard, but we give ourselves every opportunity to do just that." ■



1 Every single *Alien: Isolation* prop is made from materials 1979's set designers used.
2 *Rome II* granted each of its centurions an exponentially more powerful AI brain than their 2004 namesakes.
3 *Total War: Shogun 2* took the series back to its far eastern setting and its roots.
4 *Spartan: Total Warrior* was a flawed attempt to spin off a thirdperson action-adventure.
5 *Total War Battles: Shogun* was the series' mobile debut.
6 *Napoleon: Total War* was a follow-up to *Empire: Total War*

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Dark Souls II 360, PS3
We knew *Dark Souls II* would give us a dozen different ways to play, but we never expected anything quite like the Rat King Covenant. 'Brodents', as they've been nicknamed, summon players to the Grave Of Saints, making foes run a gauntlet of traps and hostile enemies. We watch, we laugh, and if they make it up the ladder, we're waiting at the top with a pot of armour-wrecking acid.

Dark Souls II 360, PS3
Another option presents itself the moment you discover enemies eventually stop respawning. It alters the way you plan boss runs and changes the value of souls, sure, but we've found there's a peaceful beauty to be found in areas harvested and cleared of threats. Soon enough, that pleasing sense of cleansing the world had us lapping areas until nothing was left, then igniting a Bonfire Ascetic and doing it all again.

Dark Souls II 360, PS3
Finally, there's the simple thrill of exploration. We're still finding new areas, hidden treasures and illusory walls on our third playthrough, and in the process are developing a new appreciation for Drangleic. It may not have the coherent, corkscrewing design of Lordran, but *Dark Souls II*'s more open structure means you can tour its varied world in almost any order you like. Naturally, we're leaving The Gutter until there are no other options left.



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REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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The next life

You're in a firefight. Bullets zing past your head, so you duck behind a pillar. Milliseconds later, a perfectly cooked grenade drops at your feet, detonates, and your ragdoll form flies through the air. It's a scenario typical of the modern multiplayer shooter, but what happens next is crucial.

Treyarch's David Vonderhaar once laid out the *COD* maker's philosophy: it should never take long to get back into the action, but nor should you be at risk of death within three seconds of spawning. Games built on interactions with other people quickly lose their sheen if fights are briefer than the wait between them, yet infuriate if your feet are continually swept from under you. *COD*'s solution to this problem is twofold: to boost walk speeds to ever-more-unrealistic levels and to keep the map design tight. As *COD* has progressed, it has become faster and smaller, but *Ghosts*' spawn issues illustrate that it has lost sight of its own rules.



Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare (p116) also diminishes its gunplay because it fails to observe Vonderhaar's wisdom. You spawn far from the action, the wait lengthened by characters' patient gaits. It may sprout a few novel ideas, but in this hyperactive genre, it just cannot keep up.

Titanfall (p102), however, sees Respawn attempting to recreate *COD4*'s generation-defining success. It, too, faces a precarious balance issue: its maps must be large to accommodate the lanes and building-sized cover that hulking robot suits need, yet quick to cross on foot. Its fix is a beautifully refined evolution of age-old game ideas: with double jumps and wall runs, its Pilots can rapidly traverse large spaces, and AI creeps ensure your trigger finger will be busy within seconds of each new spawn. A decade of twitch multiplayer has taught us that realism is secondary to plentiful reaction tests, a lesson Respawn has learned well.

Titanfall

Publisher EA
Developer Respawn Entertainment
Format PC, Xbox One
Release Out now

Titanfall's biggest problem is the hardware for which it is supposed to be a killer app. Playing on Xbox One means lower resolution, longer load times, more screen tearing and a choppier framerate than on PC, calling into question Respawn's decision to have the console version run at 792p. It adds up to *Titanfall* falling short of being a convincing endorsement of Xbox One's capabilities.

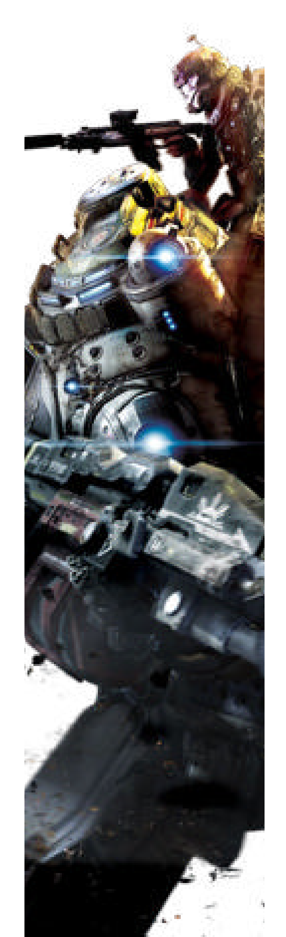
It does, however, hew closely to Microsoft's original vision for its console. *Titanfall* is a glimpse of what might have been the norm: it kicks you to the title screen if you idle at the main menu, its tutorial is unplayable without an Internet connection, and its campaign mode is inaccessible without networked company. Always-online runs to the very core of *Titanfall*'s design, with Microsoft's Azure network not only helping to fling about a level of carnage that Respawn claims wouldn't be possible otherwise, but also powering a stream of AI creeps, a concept on loan from *Dota 2*. These prove essential in keeping the action flowing, ensuring you're rarely far from something to shoot, but let's hope they don't represent the extent of Azure's power. These goons are as dumb as they come, facing the action only rarely and, even when they do line up a target, seldom letting off more than a single round.

Here, however, that's exactly how Respawn wants it. Its AI combatants exist solely to make the battlefield busier and give you easy kills, reducing the countdown timer before your next surge in power. *Titanfall* moves to the beat of the cooldown – the refilling meters that govern Tactical Ability powers, its arsenal's reload animations, the killcam intermission before your next spawn – but the most significant of the lot is a timer ticking down in the screen's bottom-right corner. When you're on foot as a misleadingly named Pilot, it counts down to your next Titanfall, which causes a hulking mecha to drop from orbit with a satisfying thunk. Hop inside and a new timer ticks down to your Titan's Core ability, which gives a brief boost in a power that's tailored to its strengths. Almost everything you do in the game – killing grunts, downing Titans, capturing flags – shaves seconds off your vital Titanfall timer.

What ensues is a game of time management in which you plan your moves around when your various powers will be available. As a Pilot, you'll lie in wait for your Cloak ability to recharge before making a dash for the objective, or call in a Titan on the approach to an enemy base, knowing it'll have hit terra firma by the time you emerge with the opposition's flag.

Titans themselves are, despite their convincing heft, surprisingly flexible, and much of that comes from the loadout system. The three chassis are the most obvious differentiators: Ogre is the tank; Atlas, the all-rounder; Stryder, the flightier, more brittle option. It's a classic trinity whose individual strengths are emphasised further by Cores, which improve shields, increase damage and give unlimited dashes respectively. Yet the Titans' physical design only tells you so much, with weaponry, Tactical Abilities and two perk-style Kits empowering a wide range of playstyles. You'd expect Stryder to be best from distance, for instance, but close-range dominance can be yours with canny use of dashes, a sparking cloud of Electric Smoke, the Triple Threat (which fires three powerful grenades) and a Kit that greatly increases the damage of your melee punch.

Stomping around in these robots does a lot to ensure Titanfall feels like more than Call Of Duty: Future Warfare



However you choose to kit out your Titan, simply stomping around in these hulking robots is a delight, and does an awful lot to ensure *Titanfall* feels like more than *Call Of Duty: Future Warfare*. Infinity Ward's legacy is everywhere, though, found in the menu layouts, the loadout system and the levelling structure's unlockables and challenges. Still, you know you're playing something different the second you first set foot on the battlefield. The Titans may take centre stage, but foot soldiers are *Titanfall*'s real stars.

Pilots are surprisingly powerful, not least because they're wonderfully agile, their wall run and double jump ensuring the trek back from respawn point to frontline becomes a game in itself. No longer do you sprint headlong for the cluster of dots on the radar, either; instead you set off at an angle, looking for a wall from which to springboard into the sky. The impact on map design is obvious, with inviting networks of platforms and walls making being on foot feel more like a firstperson *Tony Hawk's* game than a sci-fi shooter.

The Pilot's arsenal is rather more traditional, a genre-standard blend of assault and sniper rifles, sub- and light machine guns, and a single semi-automatic shotgun. You'll have just ten primary weapons by the time you hit the level cap of 50, though that's mitigated by the customisation options, a four-strong suite of anti-Titan weapons, and the ability to rodeo on an enemy mecha's back, ripping off a panel and blasting away at its weak point. Burn cards, which offer single-use, single-life boosters (see 'Burn after dealing'), further widen the range of tools at your disposal.

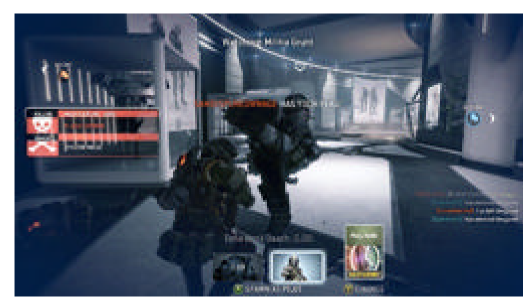
All lingering concerns that Respawn is sticking a little too closely to genre conventions evaporate when you lay your hands on the Smart Pistol Mk5, which automatically locks on to targets within its short range, a single squeeze of the trigger dispatching every tagged foe before you. It's not as overpowered as it sounds, however. It'll slay a standard grunt with a single round, but you need to acquire three locks to put down an enemy Pilot, which is no mean feat when facing an unpredictable moving target.

It does, however, make for a gentle landing in this unfamiliar gameworld. Your first hours in *Titanfall* aren't spent looking down a rifle's sights, but scanning ▶



ABOVE Pilots can score heavy damage by aiming at a Titan's red-hued weak spots, though the foot soldier's best option is to rodeo on its back and shoot the core. This also causes Titans on autopilot to stop in their tracks.
LEFT The rodeo kicks off a fine metagame between Pilots, with a player in a Titan able to eject into the sky and shoot their aggressor off their mecha's back. Those wishing to stay in the cockpit can kill assailants with Electric Smoke

BELOW The Smart Pistol might be *Titanfall*'s greatest innovation, letting beginners feel powerful from the off. You have to tailor your approach to its strengths, however, hunting players from out of sight, since you'll lose more face-to-face gunfights than you win



ABOVE In a clear attempt to fix *Call Of Duty*'s knife kills, *Titanfall*'s melee is a flying kick that's slow to start up. Mission accomplished, but it's odd that a soldier who takes five bullets to kill dies from a boot to the stomach



the periphery, planning out Pilot routes and Titan placement, plotting the complex networks of buildings, tunnels and open spaces that make up these varied playgrounds. Despite the frenetic battle raging, you can learn at a surprisingly languid pace. When you call in a Titan, you needn't take the controls, but can instruct it to follow your movements or stand guard in a particular spot. You can avoid enemy Pilots, instead focusing on dispatching the AI grunts, which counts towards your team's score in Attrition deathmatches and whittles down your Titanfall timer. As you become more comfortable with the mechanics and the game's 14 maps, you gradually start to play a more active role, taking on enemy Pilots, mastering the Titan controls, and working your way up the scoreboard. It's an elegant flattening of the learning curve for a genre in which new recruits tend to struggle.

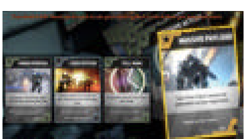
Yet as finely designed and smartly tuned as *Titanfall*'s various systems are, Respawn stumbles along the way. The campaign is nonsense, a standalone entry on the main menu that mixes together the Attrition (team deathmatch) and Hardpoint (point capturing) gametypes. It tells its story through constant radio chatter that you'll probably miss because you're too focused on the fight in front of you, too preoccupied with staying alive to absorb exposition. Not that it matters: win or lose, the story moves on regardless. It's all over quickly enough, at least, but you'll have to get through it if you want to unlock two of the three Titan chassis, which may pose a problem for those who buy the game later on when the servers are less busy.

For too long, obviously multiplayer-focused shooters have shipped with short, humdrum singleplayer campaigns, but while *Titanfall*'s shift away from that is commendable, the package as a whole is slight. In a multiplayer-only game, just five modes feels stingy. Attrition and Hardpoint are joined by Capture The Flag, mecha-centric brawl Last Titan Standing, and Pilot Hunter, in which only enemy foot-soldier kills count towards your team's score. Yet while every mode puts you in a team, there's very little teamwork on show during public matches on either Xbox One or PC, at least partially because of how individually powerful the rich toolset makes you feel. A well-organised group will almost always win, but omitting clan support and other community-minded features makes getting a team together harder than it should be, even given the arrival of Xbox One's belated party chat system.

Yet when you're in the thick of it, none of that matters. Where *Halo* sought to give players the same 30 seconds of fun again and again, *Titanfall* dishes out its thrills in five-second bursts that each feel markedly different to the last, all the while smoothing out some of the kinks that have dogged this genre for years. It's a thoroughly successful evolution of the twitch shooter, broadening its scope both upwards and outwards as well as expanding its toolset. The genre's focus on fast, responsive movement reaches bold new heights, too, letting you chain wall runs and double jumps into the sky before thundering back down in the cockpit of a giant robot. *Titanfall* might not be Xbox One's killer app, or Azure's proof of concept, then, but it's a long-overdue adrenaline shot for a genre that seemed in danger of flatlining.

8

ABOVE The Titans' Vortex Shield ability absorbs enemy fire Matrix-style, returning it to sender when you release LB. We prefer Electric Smoke for its wider variety of applications – it's useful against enemies of all types



BURN AFTER DEALING

The game's Burn Cards are doled out generously – you'll get them for winning, reaching your dropship alive after a lost match, downing enemy Titans, levelling up or completing challenges – though you can only hold 26 at a time, and take another three into battle with you. The most basic varieties increase weapon capacity or bullet damage, but others have specific and highly useful applications, such as knocking 80 seconds off a Titan's build time, continuous use of a Pilot's Tactical Ability, or displaying enemies on the minimap. Each card only lasts for a single life, so use them carefully, but it's a clever solution to the perk system's inherent flaw of forcing you to make a choice and stick with it, with little scope for change mid-match when things are going horribly wrong.

Post Script

Why endlessly rewarding players is not endlessly rewarding

Shooters are the ultimate videogame power fantasy: a man and a gun fighting through a string of life-or-death encounters with the heart-in-mouth tension of war but none of the risk. Yet the online FPS's sparse traditional framework – a winner, a loser and a scoreboard – naturally limits its own longevity. The object of the game never changes, its systems stay fixed in place, and you're as powerful when you set foot on the battlefield as when you leave it. The thrill wears off.

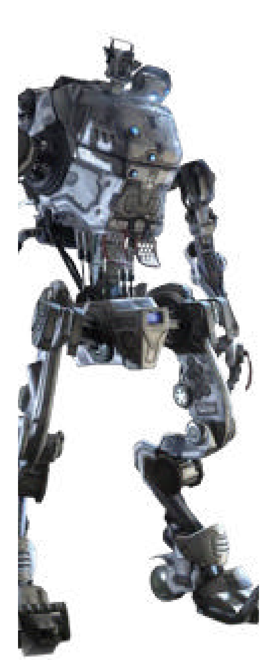
Infinity Ward offered two solutions to that problem in *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Its persistent levelling system, which ensures players are always working towards something new, might be its greatest gift to the industry as a whole. What it gave to the FPS power fantasy, however, was the killstreak, which doles out rewards of increasing bombast to players who can rack up kills without getting caught in the crossfire.

We vividly remember lying prone under the stairway in the big house on the hill in *Modern Warfare 2*'s Estate map, our sights trained on the front door, waiting anxiously for our streak of ten kills to become 11. It felt like the whole enemy team must've known we were there, and a well-placed frag grenade, sniper round or shotgun shell would reduce all our good work to nothing. After what we imagined were several minutes, but was probably only a handful of seconds, an enemy walked in and made the fatal mistake of checking his corners before looking under the stairs. Two rifle bursts and he was gone, a message onscreen telling us a new killstreak was ours. We found a quiet corner, pressed right on the D-pad and were warped high into the sky to take the controls of an AC-130 gunship. Eleven kills quickly became 12, then 15, then 20. We'd earned our reward, and the payoff was enormous.

Primarily because it was so rare, though. Only the very best could start every game confident they'd reach the high-end killstreaks – the Chopper Gunner, AC-130 and match-ending Tactical Nuke – without the perfect storm of a cool head, steady aim and hefty dose of luck on which we mere mortals had to rely. A rummage in the toybox was a rare occurrence indeed, which just made it all the sweeter when it came.

Titanfall is the work of a studio that considers such uncertainty a problem rather than a strength, and that sees the spawn-sprint-die loop of the downtime between streaks as something to be fixed. Respawn wants every single player to feel powerful. It's why the Pilots have the Smart Pistol, their double jumps and wall runs, and can rodeo a giant robot to death. It's why the maps are populated with a steady stream of weak, witless AI cannon fodder. Above all, it's why the titular Titanfalls aren't solely the preserve of the very best players, but guaranteed to all of them in time.

As you get better, you get your hands on the toys quicker, but none ever really boosts your chances of winning



It's certainly effective. In your very first multiplayer match, you'll wall run and double jump and cut down a dozen grunts before calling a massive robot from orbit, jumping into the cockpit and watching the sparks and bodies fly. You might end up on the losing side with an abysmal kill/death ratio, but you'll have wreaked a good deal of destruction while doing so, making a few widows and destroying a few billion dollars' worth of machinery. You'll feel pretty good about yourself.

Yet this supposed solution also creates new problems. What you get in the first round is what you get in every match you play, and while unlocks, loadouts and Burn Cards offer flexibility and empower different playstyles, they don't afford any tangible increase in power. As you get better, you get your hands on the toys quicker, but none ever really boosts your chances of winning. *Modern Warfare 2*'s AC-130 could turn a match on its head and the Nuke simply won the day, but while there is a clear advantage in being the first to call in a Titan, it's short-lived and no guarantee of victory.

It's symptomatic of a game that goes out of its way to constantly reward players. The perk-like Burn Cards are given out almost as quickly as you can use them. Many of the game's challenges merely ask that you keep playing – spending an hour with a certain gun; travelling so many kilometres on foot – and reward you with a hefty dollop of XP just for existing. Keep taking any kind of drug and tolerance builds up, the buzz wearing off unless you take progressively bigger doses. In *Titanfall*, what should be a dopamine rush in reward for a job well done is the default setting.

Fortunately, the scope of the tools at your disposal means you're able to create your own fun. You can stop mid-wall run, cloak and pick off passers-by; you can leap out of a second-storey window, return with your double jump and shoot your pursuer in the back; you can swing a gigantic robot fist and embed an enemy Pilot in the ground. In *Titanfall*, you're free to toy with ideas that are new to the genre and available from the word go. This is so much more than a man and a gun.

Developers have been tinkering with the killstreak ever since it was invented. In recent *COD*s, there has been a clear attempt to cater for the lesser skilled, with toys split into multiple classes. One carries over your streak after death, the trade-off being that the rewards support your team rather than destroy the other. None of these solutions has quite worked as intended, but more will follow. Clearly, Respawn will tinker with *Titanfall*'s framework in the inevitable sequels to come. As it does, it would do well to remind itself why the multiplayer FPS exists. When power is permanent, the fantasy rather loses its shine. ■

Infamous: Second Son

Your introductory action in *Infamous: Second Son* is an awkward minigame in which you hold your DualShock 4 sideways and vandalise a billboard with spray paint. You're limited to predefined stencils and curtailed by the invisible square that keeps your paint in the correct area of the hoarding. It's hardly an auspicious start for a game that represents, after *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, our second real opportunity to see what PlayStation 4 can do when unburdened by multiformat or cross-generational concerns.

The disappointment is only heightened by this section coming after a scrolling wall of expository text and being followed by a tutorial that includes invisible walls and reveals an odd lack of connection between hero Delsin Rowe and his environment. Parkour feels skittish and glitchy, Rowe's clumsy, flailing form often clipping through objects as he tries to gain purchase on one of the game's innumerable handholds. If it wasn't for the breathtaking view – and in terms of lighting, shadow and detail, *Second Son* exceeds even *Shadow Fall*'s visual achievements – it would be easy to confuse this with an early release for the previous console generation. And not a very good one.

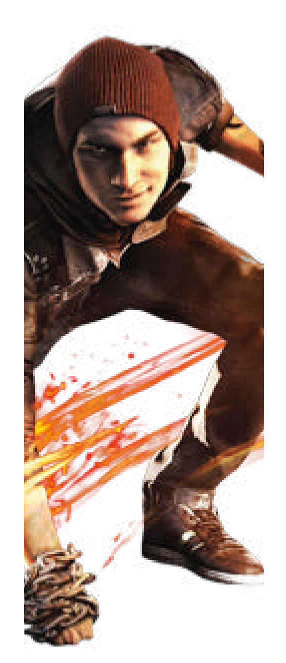
Things improve rapidly, though. Get past the wobbly beginning and it becomes clear that Sucker Punch has learned plenty from its past mistakes. Rowe quickly gains powers, and by the time he reaches Seattle – where he intends to seek revenge for harm wreaked on his native American hometown by the Department of Unified Protection (DUP) – there's no longer any need to clamber up the side of a building, since you can turn to smoke and shoot up through a vent instead.

Rowe's greatest skill is his ability to absorb the powers of other superhumans, known as conduits (or 'bioterrorists' in DUP parlance), simply by touching them. In time, he'll master powers based on smoke, neon, television signals and concrete, the latter also wielded by the head of the DUP and many of its soldiers. Each set of powers grants access to several abilities (acquired by locating DUP Core Relays and cracking them open) and has its own node-based upgrade tree. And each makes navigating the city, and outmanoeuvring enemies, an unremitting pleasure.

One mission sees us locating and investigating a series of crime scenes as we try to track down another conduit. We face no resistance at the first two, documenting evidence with our phone and sending the pictures to Rowe's brother, Reggie, a police officer and reluctant ally. But by the time we reach the third, DUP officers are already swarming around the scene and there's no choice but to fight them. Assaulting an unsuspecting patrol with focused blasts of cinder sends them running for cover, so we circle round behind them to get in close and use our flaming chain to finish the job. Then we dive into a vent at the base of a tower block and launch out of the other end on the roof, taking out two enemies with cinder shots before we land, with a flame dash carrying us across the gap to another building to deal with a sniper. Finally, we plummet down into the alley between the structures and punch the ground, sending out a shockwave of flame that catches the remaining DUP grunts off guard.

Publisher SCE
Developer Sucker Punch Productions
Format PS4
Release Out now

Get past the wobbly beginning and it becomes clear Sucker Punch has learned plenty from its past mistakes



Most encounters prove every bit as exciting and dynamic. Enemies make intelligent use of cover and react violently to the force of your superpowered attacks, deploying their own conduit abilities to escape or retaliate. The game's main missions are, for the most part, well designed and generously portioned. Even the boss fights – bar two examples, which outstay their welcome – are enjoyable enough.

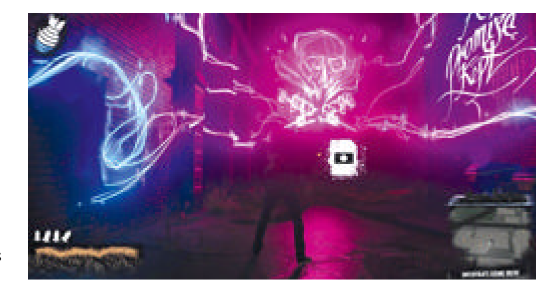
Those still haunted by the cold, empty stare of the series' previous star, Cole MacGrath, should also find themselves heartened by *Second Son*'s cast. Sure, they're all stock characters: Delsin is the angry, rebellious youth; Reggie, the serious, paternal older brother; Fetch, the eccentric girl with neon-pink hair. But they're well-realised clichés, granted charm by good writing and excellent performance capture. The story itself is well told, too, and not overlong, foregoing any attempt to pad out the game with filler.

In series tradition, Rowe's path is shaped by moral choices, too, but they're telegraphed with about as much subtlety as the neon that illuminates his Seattle. Filling your Karma meter sees you progress toward Hero or Villain status, and a chain of bad actions (headshots, civilian executions) or good ones (nonlethal takedowns, beating up drug dealers) will grant you different-coloured versions of the screen-clearing Karmic Powers. Characters will also treat you differently in cutscenes according to your choices, but your decisions have little real impact. Reggie might chastise you briefly if you opt not to protect the innocent – indiscriminately wiping out a squad of his Seattle-based colleagues, say – but you'll soon be exchanging sibling-rivalry-fuelled quips again. Still, if you decide to be a hero, your life is made harder by the need to aim for legs behind cover rather than exposed heads and to avoid collateral damage.

As an open-world game, *Second Son* feels emaciated. There's little to do in the way of side missions, and what is here becomes repetitive, unlikely to sustain interest beyond a single playthrough. Approach it as an action game that just happens to be set in a nonlinear environment and it makes more sense, but its not-inconsiderable achievements take effort to uncover. By the time you've gained the full suite of powers, though, it's easy to forget its shaky first steps and impossible not to share Rowe's vocal enthusiasm each time he does something spectacular. And Sucker Punch provides plenty of opportunities to do so.

7

RIGHT The time of day changes across the campaign, with the game at its most handsome when Neon powers are introduced as night, and the rain, begins to fall. Lurid fluorescence and wet surfaces intermingle to stunning effect







ABOVE Delsin's Karmic Powers are available following a karmic streak and trigger a spectacular, effects-laden animation that either kills or subdues every enemy within range. LEFT *Second Son*'s Seattle isn't the largest open world we've explored, but it's packed with details, if not interactions. Many shop fronts are repeated, however – you'll find two Katie O'Rife's Irish pub premises within 100 metres of each other, for example

BELOW Melee combat is weighty and satisfying, but the pleasure of Delsin's abilities is mixing melee with ranged attacks and linking them with his dash moves. When mastered, you can run dazzling rings around even intelligent foes

Post Script

Nate Fox, game director, Sucker Punch Productions

Nate Fox joined Sucker Punch in 1998, months after it was founded, to work on the lighting and environmental art of N64 platformer *Rocket: Robot On Wheels*. He moved on to co-designing the *Sly Cooper* series before being promoted to game director for *Infamous*. We meet him in London to discuss *Second Son*'s astonishing visuals, getting combat just right, and why everything good stems from *Half-Life 2*.

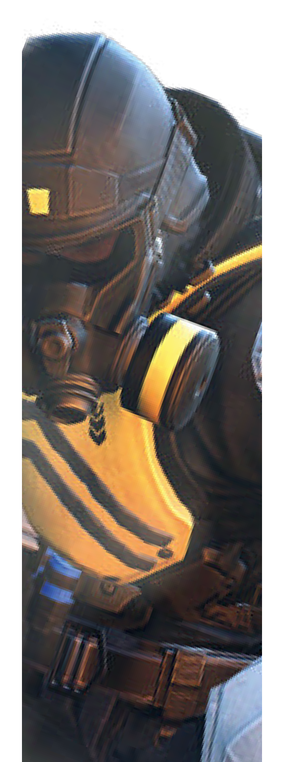


***Second Son* is a beautiful game, but it's the lighting that stands out. What did you do to capture it?**
We were very fortunate, because Sucker Punch is located right next to Seattle, so we'd go into town and take light readings at different times of the day and put those directly into the game. We have shaders that have true physical parameters of how light bounces off of an object to try to make it as realistic as possible. We're always drawing on the world as much as possible, either through sampling or creating models that represent the way the actual world around us looks. I've got to give credit to [rendering/tech art lead] Jason Connell. He's a master at figuring out how to best bring into focus the emotional quality of light in the world. It's a weird, subtle speciality – I mean, there's 'I'm a major in lighting', but he understands it on a citywide level, and you're reacting to one guy's great work.

The enemy AI is a pleasant surprise. Was it a challenge to get the DUP's behaviour right?
From my vantage point it was easy, because we hired some really talented combat designers who had a lot of experience – largely from FPSes. They worked very hard weighting encounters, with every fight being authored for differentiation and to take advantage of the terrain, making sure the enemies maintain ideal distances from the player. I think it works in the game, but it's because we had people who knew what they were doing. And in the past, we haven't had that on *Infamous* games.

Without his powers, Delsin doesn't feel very connected to the world you've built. Are you disappointed with this aspect at all?
We certainly wanted to keep that core climbing ability that we had in the first two games, but because we wanted to make buildings of much greater height and variation, we wanted to give you powers that gave you the freedom to move very quickly up and down them. And while you can climb, we didn't think it was going to be a primary mode of interaction. I mean, particularly once you get Neon, it just stops happening. So we decided that people would probably get more joy, ultimately, if we refined what we call 'supernavigation' – moves like when you smokedash through a vent and it pops you out – and make that feel good. We thought that would bring people more satisfaction than trying to meticulously scrutinise every windowsill, although we did try to make them good. As you can imagine, there are many, many thousands of windowsills.

"I think Naughty Dog, frankly, is the best at it, and they keep making these great examples for the rest of us to learn from"



The performance capture is particularly nuanced. Was it done in-house?
Yes. Really all credit goes to producer Brian Flemming, who hired some talented people to find a way to take the raw data from all these points on actors' faces and create an algorithm that would then interpret that information into something you no longer view as points on a mesh, but start thinking of as a person – someone who's suddenly encountering self-doubt or scepticism. I love it, because I think it helps draw people into the story. It's a more human connection, which I think a lot of videogames lack.

How do you feel about the state of writing in games?
I think story in games is just getting better, right? People recognise it now as an integral aspect of an interactive experience. It's not something that's slapped on to make level one, two and three hang together; now it's the centre of what you expect the interaction to be. Now it's, 'What's the emotion of the level? Not the theme, but what I am supposed to feel while going through this level?' And it's impossible to imagine a future of videogames where we don't see improvements and narrative integration moving forwards in big strides. I mean, the technology for the facial capture you see in *Second Son* isn't something that we alone have access to. All games will be doing that, and that's great, because it means actors will have more presence in games and there will be more great examples of interactive storytelling. I think Naughty Dog, frankly, is the best at it, and they keep making these great examples for the rest of us to learn from. The industry will follow. But, for me, *Half-Life 2* is the Bible; everything good comes from *Half-Life 2*, and [Valve is] excellent at making integrated narrative.

The way the DUP's concrete structures encroach on Seattle makes it feel a little bit like City 17.
Oh, yeah! And our kind of faceless martial law guys, who you can't understand what they're saying sometimes? I'm not bullshitting you, I had never thought about them in relation to the Combine before, but certainly they have a similar feel. But we went with the concrete, because we thought it's a strong thing that you cannot break. And, frankly, it's everywhere in the urban landscape, so if you had command over it, you would have command over cities themselves. ■

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes

Another *Metal Gear* and another suggestion it could be Hideo Kojima's last. It's all nonsense, of course; *Metal Gear* is Kojima's palette and the painting is different every time. The series has become an outlet for all that's on the developer's mind, dealing with the rise of the Internet and private military companies alongside a love for Triumph motorbikes. *Ground Zeroes*, however, finds him preoccupied with Guantanamo Bay, war crimes and *Grand Theft Auto*.

Ground Zeroes' version of 1975 drops Big Boss (né Snake) into a world of unspeakable atrocity that raises unanswerable questions about whether games are an appropriate medium in which to discuss rape, torture, and the other realities of war, and that's before anyone even considers how such themes lend themselves to the usual *Metal Gear* silliness, where patrolling guards can be evaded from inside a cardboard box.

Still, *Metal Gear* is a chameleon that changes shades to become whatever its creator demands, and Kojima Productions' authorial control is evident in every moment of *Ground Zeroes'* brief running time. More than perhaps any other game, it successfully weaves an intensely authored experience into an open world. Wherever you go, it's as if the developer got there first, always one step ahead of how the player's mind works.

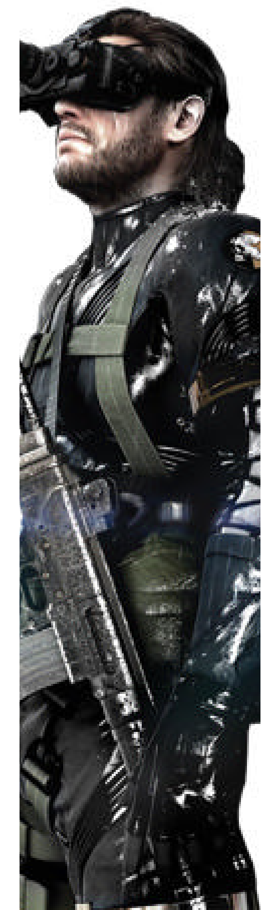
Every route you might take has been guarded, and every weak point in the soldiers' defences has been measured. Every inch of Camp Omega's open world has been touched by a designer's hand and built for a reason: each blade of grass has been placed to give you time to hide between searchlight sweeps; all the patrol routes give you windows to exploit; every worthless crate will suddenly become a vital hiding spot in some unexpected emergent situation. A smoking guard seems to walk just far enough from his truck for you to steal it; the soldier who never turns his back will be prone to coughing fits; and the roaming tank will park just long enough for you to fit it with C4. When things go wrong in most open-world games, you're offered nothing but chaos, whereas in *Ground Zeroes* discovery feels like a scripted reward, even when it's not. The AI is so orderly in its pursuit of Big Boss and its responses so seemingly designed that it makes every retry a story.

And you'll have to retread ground if you're after value for money here. With only six missions and one map, which is just a few hundred metres across, this is a game that can be 'completed' in under an hour. *Ground Zeroes* defies explanation – it's been called a prologue, a preparatory tutorial for *MGSV: The Phantom Pain* and a demo by different sources – but whatever it is, it's overpriced when the likes of *Dead Rising*'s preview chapter sold for a few pounds on Live Arcade.

But you'll want to retry. No first run will be flawless, so you'll hit restart and replay the main mission again, only this time under new rules you'll choose for yourself. This time, maybe nobody on the base dies. Next time, everybody – all 40-something of them – will die without anyone knowing you were there. The next, you'll extract every prisoner by chopper. The next, you'll hijack a tank and lay waste to the whole map. The next, you'll sit in a bush making 300-metre sniper shots and climbing the global rankings. Over time, you'll sneak into Camp Omega like a ghost, with every one of the game's intricate systems mastered.

Publisher Konami
Developer Kojima Productions
Format 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Scripted twists are supported by emergent moments as memorable as any from games a hundred times larger



***Ground Zeroes* works** because its systems are so carefully designed and well executed that they become toys with which to tinker. The AI is smart, yet it's also predictably unpredictable, with guards tending to follow their eyes and ears, but inclined to suddenly glance over a shoulder without warning. They can be choked, held up at gunpoint – interrogating them reveals ammunition stashes and hidden items – or they can be made to call a nearby friend to lure them over. Guards can be disabled with a shot to the knee and their wailing can lead other guards into a classic sniper's trap. Their reactions don't bear the same hallmarks as *Assassin's Creed*'s bumbling dimwits or *Far Cry 3*'s chaotic confusion; *Ground Zeroes'* AI is precisely as smart as it needs to be to make its missions work.

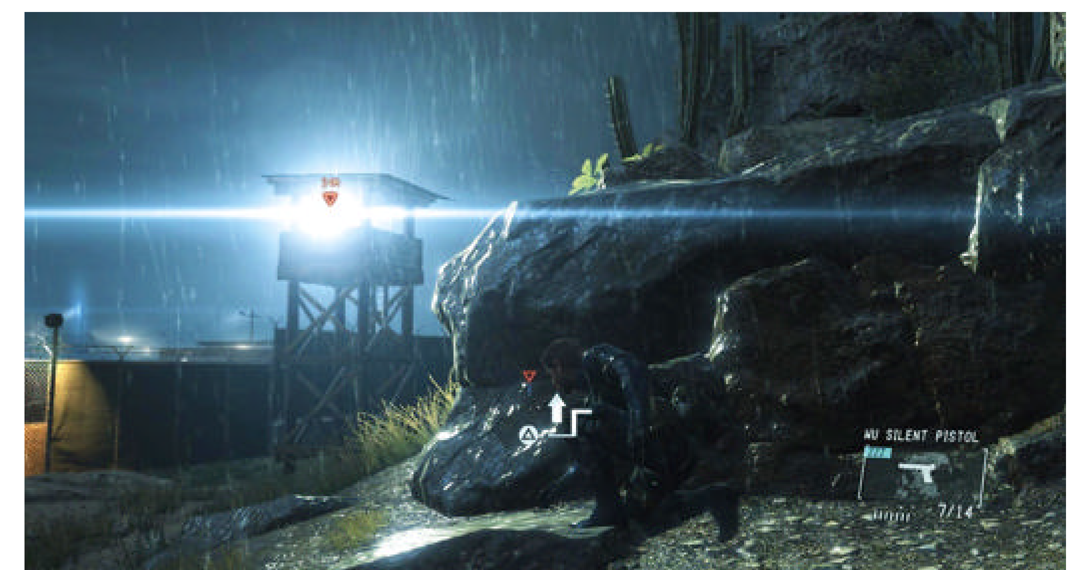
These missions are varied, too. One has you extracting a familiar-looking Japanese agent from the camp while defending him from the skies, another asks you to assassinate two war criminals hiding on the base, and a third sees you meeting an informant and recovering an audio cassette. Each flexes Fox Engine's beautiful lighting system with varied weather and a different time of day, and in every one the game changes the script at a moment's notice, throwing a tank into a routine-seeming operation, say, or a double-cross. These scripted twists are supported by emergent moments as memorable as any from game worlds a hundred times larger.

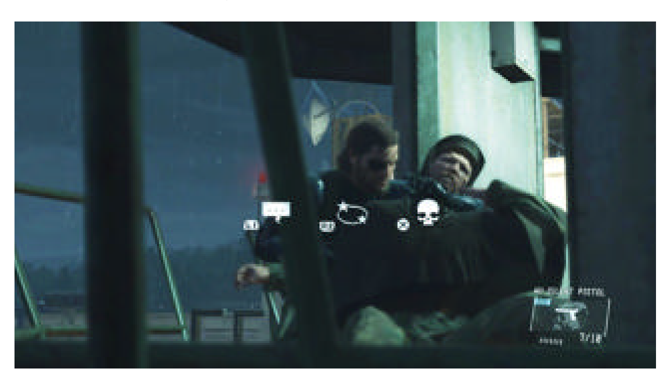
Of course, the promise of *The Phantom Pain* is seeing *Ground Zeroes'* mechanics and authorial intent writ large. There's work to do before then, though. Even on PS4, *Ground Zeroes'* version of Fox Engine feels optimised for PS3, with pop-in that the new hardware has more than enough power to overcome. The bad guys' current tendency to disappear a few hundred metres away will make 1,000-metre sniper shots difficult in *The Phantom Pain*'s huge spaces, too.

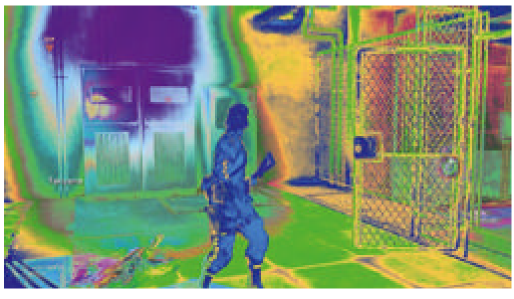
Still, if it's a demo, *Ground Zeroes* is the best demo ever; if it's a prologue, it sets up the story so well you'll spend the next year thirsting for revenge; and if it's a tutorial, the systems it teaches are so intriguing that the prospect of spending an entire game with them is irresistible. *Ground Zeroes* is a resounding success in every respect bar its price tag, but value is relative. Fourteen hours in, we're still learning.

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RIGHT While Fox Engine is built to represent reality believably, *Ground Zeroes* is still a stylised, exaggerated version of the real world, as per the series norm. **BELOW** Enemies can be questioned, killed, choked out or forced to call friends for help. Opportunities to play with the AI are plentiful. **BOTTOM** An enemy that's told to stay on the ground will lie there indefinitely until a base-wide alert rouses them. Knocking them out is a more dependable option in the short term, but its effects are temporary, while killing is the only definitive solution available to you







ABOVE The PlayStation-exclusive Déjà Vu bonus mission comes loaded with callbacks and fond nods to *Metal Gear Solid* history. It even includes one reference that threatens to break the game engine right before your eyes



Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Spark Unlimited (Team Ninja, Comcept)
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

The first of Tomonobu Itagaki's *Ninja Gaiden* games was defined by its counterattack. Activated by blocking and then pressing an attack button the moment an enemy blow connected, it powered a game that required careful play and insisted you respect your opponent, punishing mistakes severely. In the process, it set a new high bar for its genre. *Ninja Gaiden*'s been going downhill ever since, and it says much about how inexorably bound this series is to the law of diminishing returns that its latest entry's defining mechanic asks for no timing, precision or respect for your opponent. *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* is built on the QTE.

Whittle down an enemy's health sufficiently and the action briefly slows, an exclamation mark over their head prompting you to squeeze L2 and mash a button to trigger a gruesome close-up execution. Against the bog-standard zombie hordes that populate the early game, all you'll get is a modest health top-up. Against tougher enemies, the rewards are much greater, with a larger health refill and Yaiba yanking their limbs from their torso to briefly use as weapons. A killer clown yields a pair of Nunchuckles, a fire-breathing priest gives up a rocket launcher, and a mutant that spews streams of toxic bile provides a weapon that lets you do likewise. This is the only way to expand your toolset; while Ryu Hayabusa picked up new weapons during his adventures that were then permanently available from a menu screen, here they are of limited use and must be acquired through a process that is all too easy to miss.

The camera is the main culprit, which is especially galling given that developer Spark Unlimited clearly recognises, and has sought to fix, this series' longest-standing problem. By replacing Team Ninja's infamous thirdperson camera with a fixed viewpoint, *Yaiba* should be off to a good start. But the resolute insistence on tracking everything onscreen frequently reduces its ninja protagonist to a mere speck. One of our countless unfair deaths came during a rooftop battle with a pair of zombie wrestlers, when the commitment to tracking the movements of both meant we met an unseen demise while occluded by mid-screen scenery. The camera spends much of the game zoomed out as far as possible and this, combined with the way its lens gets covered in yellow goo if you take too much bile damage, frequently makes it not only impossible to track your opponents, but even to see where you are. You'll find yourself mashing X to dash a few times in the hope of picking yourself out among the crowd.

It makes those QTE prompts hard to spot, too, which wouldn't be a problem were they not so essential to success. Weapon-bearing enemies have high health, but each is vulnerable to the powers of certain pickups. It's a system that has little grounding in logic – fire priests are weak against electricity, while using bile on an electric foe freezes them in brittle hunks of gold crystal – but whatever you can lay your hands on is going to fare better than Yaiba's standard sword, flail and cybernetic fist. Battles quickly devolve into the same pattern: attack, look for the QTE prompt, yank off a zombie's arms, collect the health pickups to repair the damage you inevitably took, then use their weapon until it runs out. Then repeat the whole process over and over and over again. And whether it's down to the camera, to the fact that you did so much damage that you didn't even get a finisher prompt or, incredibly rarely, from a genuine mistake that you immediately understand, we suggest you prepare to die.

Within a couple of hours, you'll have seen every single enemy the game has to offer. From there on, Spark simply mixes up their grouping across fights lasting three or four waves with no checkpoints in between. Fill a meter and you can click both sticks to activate the Devil Trigger-alike Bloodlust, but you'll be too afraid to use it, because it takes seemingly forever to recharge and you don't know how many more waves are going to magically rise from the ground.

Basic combat is dismal, turgid stuff, yet accounts for almost all the action. The only changes of pace come from the occasional boss fight, some trial-and-error, one-button platforming sections, and a levelling system that powers a new contender for gaming's most pointless skill tree. Supposed light relief comes from your exchanges with Miss Monday, Yaiba's liaison with the mysterious corporation that resurrected him after a fatal tussle with Hayabusa. He pointlessly directs a stream of lazily misogynistic patter at the screen-corner redhead, whose bra pokes out over her shirt, a black tie disappearing down her cleavage. It says much that this is merely the least of this game's litany of problems.

Those flaws are perhaps most perfectly encapsulated when, two-thirds of the way through, Yaiba tracks Hayabusa down. It takes us two dozen retries to decide to forget everything we've learned in the past decade of *Ninja Gaiden* games. We stop learning attack patterns, looking for openings, or respecting our opponent. We get up close, mashing the same four-hit combo over and over, dodging his AOE attack before resuming our tedious assault, and we win. Hayabusa is, here as ever, elegant, powerful and precise. Yaiba is dumb.

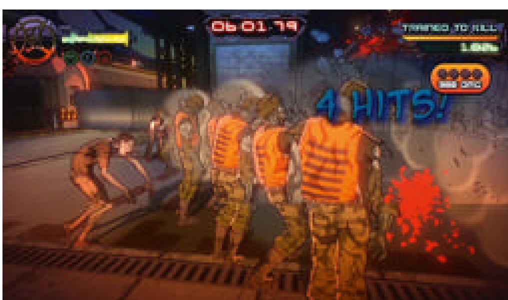
All of which is baffling, given that this was made under the eye of Keiji Inafune, who famously lambasted how far his countrymen had fallen behind western game development. His solution, apparently, is to turn one of Japan's last great series into a repetitive grind riddled with cheap deaths, and to help a western studio with a poor track record reach a new, unthinkable low. Or perhaps Inafune's plan wasn't to make Japanese games better, but western ones dramatically worse. In that case, this is a job well done.

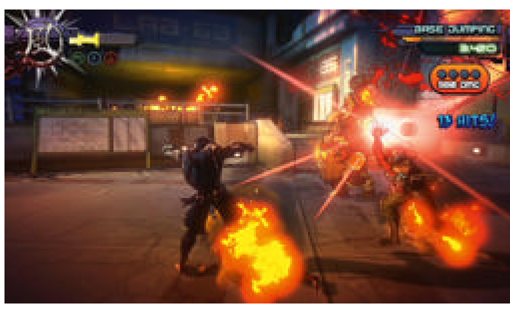
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It takes us two dozen retries to decide to forget everything we've learned in the past decade of Ninja Gaiden games



GRAND DESIGNS
Behind the industry curtain, market research firms offer up best practice guides, laying out the features that tend to go down well with press and players alike. That, we assume, is behind *Yaiba*'s XP levelling system, which powers a skill tree packed with pointless upgrades. Things start well enough, with new combos and moves, but before long you're ploughing skill points into reducing the impact of status effects and making QTEs easier. The box-ticking continues elsewhere with collectible diary entries (sample line: "I bet you think I'm overreacting about Yaiba and the magnitude of my fuckedness") that are imaginatively titled Story Pieces, while a medal ranking system is a laughable inclusion in a game that isn't even worth finishing.





LEFT Grenade-wielding zombies pull the pin and rush you, giving you a few seconds to kite them into the surrounding group. The resulting blast isn't that damaging, but it does knock foes down

TOP Occasionally the environment will help you out. Here, minecarts knock down anything caught in their fixed path. Outside of combat are some simple environmental puzzles – throwing an electrified zombie at a generator, for example. ABOVE We're sure Yaiba's in here somewhere. This is nothing compared to later in the game, however, when enemies are a far greater threat than these standard undead, and the camera zooms out in order to keep everything in view. RIGHT Hayabusa is pitched as the antagonist, but it's no surprise to discover the corporation making cyborgs from the dead doesn't exactly have pure intentions



South Park: The Stick Of Truth

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Obsidian Entertainment
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

Who'd have guessed that 2014 would be the year of the videogame comedy? Mere weeks after *Jazzpunk*'s impression of Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker, *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* almost faultlessly mimics Trey Parker and Matt Stone's animated series, retaining its brand of scattergun satire and scatological humour. Never knowingly understated, *The Stick Of Truth* is boisterous, provocative, puerile and fearless in its desire to shock and offend. More importantly, it's often funny, thanks to the commitment of Parker and Stone, who have been more heavily involved than would ordinarily be expected of a tie-in. Delays to the release prompted the pair to admit, "Getting the game up to the crappy standards of the show has been a real challenge." Happily, the result lives down to that claim, and then some.

If anything, *The Stick Of Truth* sees the duo attempting to push the boundaries even further than usual. There's an extended sequence in an abortion clinic that's every bit as horrifying as you might imagine. You'll fight Nazi zombies that shriek "Sieg heil!" before vomiting because you've thrown an air biscuit right in their faces. There's an extended sex scene that is at once hysterical and squirmingly uncomfortable. Every kind of bodily fluid features heavily, while a climactic sequence sets a new low as the most repulsive videogame environment we've ever encountered. We've also learned a core tenet of the gentlemen's code: it is, apparently, imperative that one should never fart on a man's balls. All notions of subtlety are abandoned, in other words, and the result is a laughs-per-minute ratio that compares favourably to just about any other comedy, interactive or otherwise.

At its heart, however, this is a sweet-natured story of a new kid attempting to fit in. Your early days in this sleepy mountain town are anything but quiet, and your mute protagonist quickly joins in with a live-action roleplaying game organised by Cartman, who is on typically profane form here. It's humans vs drow elves, and you start on the former side, although a later plot event demands you decide between the two. But while your infrequent choices help colour the story, your path is written from the outset. This is a broadly linear game, which may come as a surprise to those expecting Obsidian to bring to bear its expertise with branching narratives.

Indeed, there's little evidence of the studio's hallmarks at all, and the most obvious influence is the *Paper Mario* series. *The Stick Of Truth*'s turn-based battle system is similarly predicated on timed button presses for more efficient attacks and blocks, while enemies can be bypassed or attacked before they've spotted you, conveying a negative status effect or granting you the first hit. You're also joined by allies with a range of abilities that can be used in and out of battle. Occasionally, you'll encounter rudimentary environmental puzzles, and while their solutions will rarely prompt much head scratching, they commonly trigger a slapstick payoff, or even let you kill opponents from afar. You might shoot a sparking cable to electrify a puddle of liquid, for instance, or collapse some loose scenery to thin out enemy numbers before you approach.

There's variety to combat, too, derived from your partners' distinctive powers and a broad array of weapons, which spans from traditional swords and staves to lurid purple sex toys. Meanwhile, each item of gear you equip conveys buffs, and that's before you apply the patches that provide further stat bonuses. And you can buy dyes to colour costumes, which double as disguises in certain areas.

You'll fight Nazi zombies that cry "Sieg heil!" before vomiting because you've thrown an air biscuit right in their faces



BIGGER, LONGER AND CUT
The European console versions of the game have been pruned, although this was a decision taken by the publisher, rather than a removal at the censor's behest. Players will miss out on several short noninteractive scenes, such as poor Randy Marsh being violently anally assaulted, along with a playable sequence in the game's later stages that the squeamish may be pleased at having been spared from. Parker and Stone have fun with the edits, though – each missing scene is replaced by an image of Michelangelo's David holding his face in his hands against an EU flag, with a witty description of the excised content beneath. The cuts are strangely inconsistent, however, particularly in light of the startling set-pieces that remain in the finished game.

Not that any of this requires a great deal of thought. While it's entertaining to set up combo attacks – offer a 'Canadian handshake' to an immolated enemy and the subsequent reaction of methane and fire is equal parts devastating and amusing – your abilities often feel overpowered, not least when you call upon the special powers of your partner characters. The ability to quaff potions before any offensive action saps much of the tension from encounters, and given the abundance of health-restoring items, you'll sail through boss battles. Even those with limited experience of RPGs would be advised to start on Hardcore difficulty to make the most of the range of tactical possibilities, though it's still a pleasure to experiment without the fear of failure, not least because almost every move comes with its own punchline.

There are a few rough edges as well. Though the social-network-themed menus are a neat touch, they're sluggish. Loading times are excessive, and each successfully completed objective prompts a barrage of messages that cause the engine to stutter.

For all that, *The Stick Of Truth* is surprisingly game-literate. There's a suite of in-jokes, ranging from the collectable toys that ape Pokémon to more overt nods to *Skyrim* and even 8bit RPGs. Elsewhere, conventions are sent up gloriously. Repeating soundbites are excused by NPCs insisting they're being forced to stick to the script, while an inspired gag about audio logs only gets funnier the more you find. The jabs can be predictable, but they're delivered with an affectionate wink, and it's evident that Parker and Stone know and love videogames. So, yes, their irreverent take on the medium may have a few technical shortcomings, but you'll usually be grinning far too much to care.

8



RIGHT As the grand wizard of the Kingdom of Kupa Keep, Cartman takes his role seriously, berating others who fail to stay in character. Repetitive NPC dialogue is excused early on when one shopkeeper concedes that he's been bullied into "sticking to the script"



LEFT Keeping the overworld free of game clutter is a smart design choice – it looks and feels like an extended episode of the series, with little to break the illusion bar the glinting of an item that can be targeted with your ranged weapon





ABOVE Fighter, Mage and Thief classes are self-explanatory, while the Jew is a paladin/monk hybrid invented by Cartman. Whichever class you adopt – and regardless of the name you enter – you'll be dubbed Douchebag.
LEFT The good-natured Butters is your first partner character, but outside specific environmental puzzles, you'll rarely feel the need to switch. He'll draw enemy attention in battle, heal you before each turn, and his special ability sees him unleash devastating attacks as alter ego Professor Chaos

Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare

Publisher EA
Developer PopCap Games
Format 360, PC, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now (360, Xbox One), spring (PC)

To help while away time spent waiting in the lobby for the next spot of *Garden Warfare* to begin, PopCap has provided a distraction in the form of collectible stickers. These blind packs are acquired with credits earned in the main game and provide you with in-game perks, such as variants on the base classes, customisation items, and an array of plants (or zombies) to assist you in the more tower-defence-focused modes. It's snappy, moreish and immediately gratifying; all characteristics the main game fails to possess.

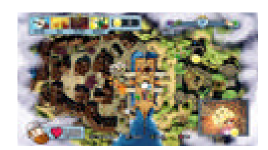
Which is especially disappointing given that, aside from a few LOD wobbles, *Garden Warfare* sure looks the part. PopCap's charming 2D cast has made the leap to 3D almost entirely unscathed, and these bright, chunky worlds could have sprung from Nintendo's imagination. You'll have plenty of time to study them, given the glacial pace at which you're forced to move. Some of the assembled troops can briefly move faster by using one of their abilities – the Scientist, for example, has a short-range teleport move, while the Peashooter can become 'hyper' for a short time – but this only makes it all the more agonising when you're forced to wait out the cooldown period before being able to travel at speeds that really should have been the default.

Characters not blessed with the extra puff to break into a run must make do with their own bespoke set of three abilities. The Cactus, whose main strength is picking off targets from a distance with its needles, can place Potato Mines and Tallnut walls to create deadly bottlenecks, and its Garlic Drone can provide air support with airstrikes and an onboard cannon (the zombie Engineer has a robotic equivalent). The Sunflower, meanwhile, can establish a healing beam link with nearby allies, deploy healing potted sunflowers or root itself to the ground and fire a damaging sunbeam.

While the assignment of sprinting and even grenades to only certain classes feels a shade too contrived, the mix of abilities is still appealingly complementary, and successful teamwork is both explicitly encouraged and satisfying. The languorous pace that makes it so frustrating to return to the fray in Team Deathmatch is somewhat alleviated in Garden Ops and Gardens And Graveyards, both twists on tower defence that more aggressively localise the action.

Sadly, any gains made here are squandered by woolly controls, a dearth of feedback and infuriating inaccuracy even with aiming assist dialed up to maximum. There's the seed of something much greater in PopCap's first foray into team shooters, but it's telling that the elements that most closely resemble the series' 2D outings are the ones that fare best.

5



PLANT HIGHER
Boss Mode is *Garden Warfare*'s SmartGlass component, but can be played using a pad or Kinect. It's akin to *Battlefield*'s Commander mode, offering a top-down view of the action and allowing players to support their team with a small number of abilities, including the deployment of healing stations or airstrikes. Resources come in the form of brains or sundrops, and an inset camera displays the results of your actions. It's all a bit thin, however, and unlikely to sustain interest beyond your first few exploratory forays.



When scoped, characters obscure a huge portion of the screen, a problem only worsened when you introduce the large hats found in sticker packs. Keeping tabs is already difficult thanks to the busy weapon effects

Banished

Exile is a severe sentence, and *Banished* would have you remember that. Each world seed may fill the screen with sun-dappled woods and rolling hills, but you'll soon discover these bucolic-seeming idylls are just waiting to swallow your hapless charges whole. We've watched settlers perish from starvation, hypothermia or, in the cases of a lucky few, old age. Either way, the slightest oversight means a flurry of low-key tombstone icons and a restart, hoping to build on your impressions of what went wrong.

Banished is a contradiction. It has the visual polish to suggest teams of 3D artists, your miniature village painted richly by the passing seasons, yet it's the work of just one man. It's pastorally slow paced, explicitly telling you to push the simulation speed up between events in tutorials, but carries a deceptive momentum that resists even early corrections. It's non-combative, but embroils you in a battle with Mother Nature's spiteful side. Winter is coming, and you need firewood.

You start with the bare essentials: some seeds, a storage barn and convicts in semi-urgent need of housing and food. Direct control is limited, too, your workers offering as little granularity as the average *Sim City* denizen. But the game is hands off with you as well. Shorn of a monetary economy, every construct is available from the start. And while to overstretch is to trigger a deadly domino effect, you'll never be told when or where to focus your efforts.

That freedom extends to your objectives, in that there aren't any. *Banished* is a simulation with a rich set of interlocking rules to discover, and eschews the contrivance of win conditions. Disasters will befall you regularly because of that detailed model, though, be it an infestation that makes a once-healthy orchard suitable only for matchwood, a twister, or your own greed depriving you of local resources. You'll watch the death notifications rack up and begin again.

After many false starts and several hours, you'll learn enough to know your continued existence means patient forethought, steady growth and tracking a lot of tiny numbers across menu panes. But the challenge of establishing a stable community makes that engaging for a time, even if it's too easy to waste energy on a colony you doomed ages ago with a tiny error.

Banished is a rare technical achievement, pure in design and of purpose. Its many deaths almost always feel fair, and the battle up to self-sufficiency is gripping. But the absence of a long game beyond this early toil makes it hard to find reasons to settle down here, except for the views, especially if you've established yourself on these frosty plains before.

7

Publisher/developer Shining Rock Software
Format PC
Release Out now



TREE HOGGER
There's a sustainability message in *Banished*, demanding a transition from strip mining to slower but renewable methods of resource production. It's a tricky ask, though, given how few hands you'll ever have to spare. The rate at which you encounter these problems can occasionally frustrate, too, and it's hard to tell if that's simply a product of hard maths or accelerated by a 21st-century agenda that's ill at ease with the rural concerns of your wards.

***Banished* offers up delightful vistas and intricate towns, but repetition is evident in larger structures, with one church looking much like any other. It's a rare tell of the game's origins, one offset by the shifting countryside**



TowerFall: Ascension

TowerFall: Ascension is an uproarious single-screen multiplayer brawler that differentiates itself from all the other uproarious single-screen brawlers released of late with its focus on precision, its clear visual design, and the strict economy of ammunition built into its chief mode of combat: archery.

Each player begins the round with three arrows, which are a persistent part of the gameworld. Arrows lodged in corpses or the environment can be retrieved by anybody, and this makes careless shooting risky. The pursuit of arrows also ensures that players keep moving; despite a focus on ranged combat, this isn't a game where camping is especially viable.

Your moveset includes wall-jumping, ledge grabbing, and a mid-air dodge. It's possible to dodge in eight directions, meaning that it can be used like a double jump as well as to evade projectiles. Crucially, dodging an incoming arrow at the precise moment it reaches you allows you to snatch it out of the air, adding further depth to fourplayer duels and providing options when facing arrow-spewing monsters in twoplayer co-op.

The only way to kill a dodging opponent is to leap onto their heads. Even arrow-less foes are dangerous at close range, and this in turn encourages a race for the high ground. Maps wrap around – players leaving from one side will reappear at the screen's opposite edge – and therefore dropping off the bottom of the screen is potentially a way to quickly turn a disadvantageous position into a more advantageous one.

The drawback of this system is that it is confusing. Watching the sides of the map is just as important as watching the area immediately around your character, and this can diffuse your focus in a way that plays against the game's greatest strength – the complex interactions between arrows and players that occurs at close range. It does not ultimately prevent experienced players from enjoying the game, but early on the frustration can dull *TowerFall*'s lustre.

This may be the age of the single-screen brawler, but *TowerFall* is among the most feature-rich of its kind. Three multiplayer modes are available, including team deathmatch. Its twoplayer co-op, which repurposes multiplayer maps as wave-survival challenges, also functions as a challenging singleplayer score-attack game. Then there's the deep well of archery challenges available to players who are seeking to fully master *TowerFall's* mechanics. The lack of online multiplayer means that those who can't gather a group of friends in front of their screen will miss out on the game's best feature, but *TowerFall* still does an admirable job of providing plenty to do in its absence.

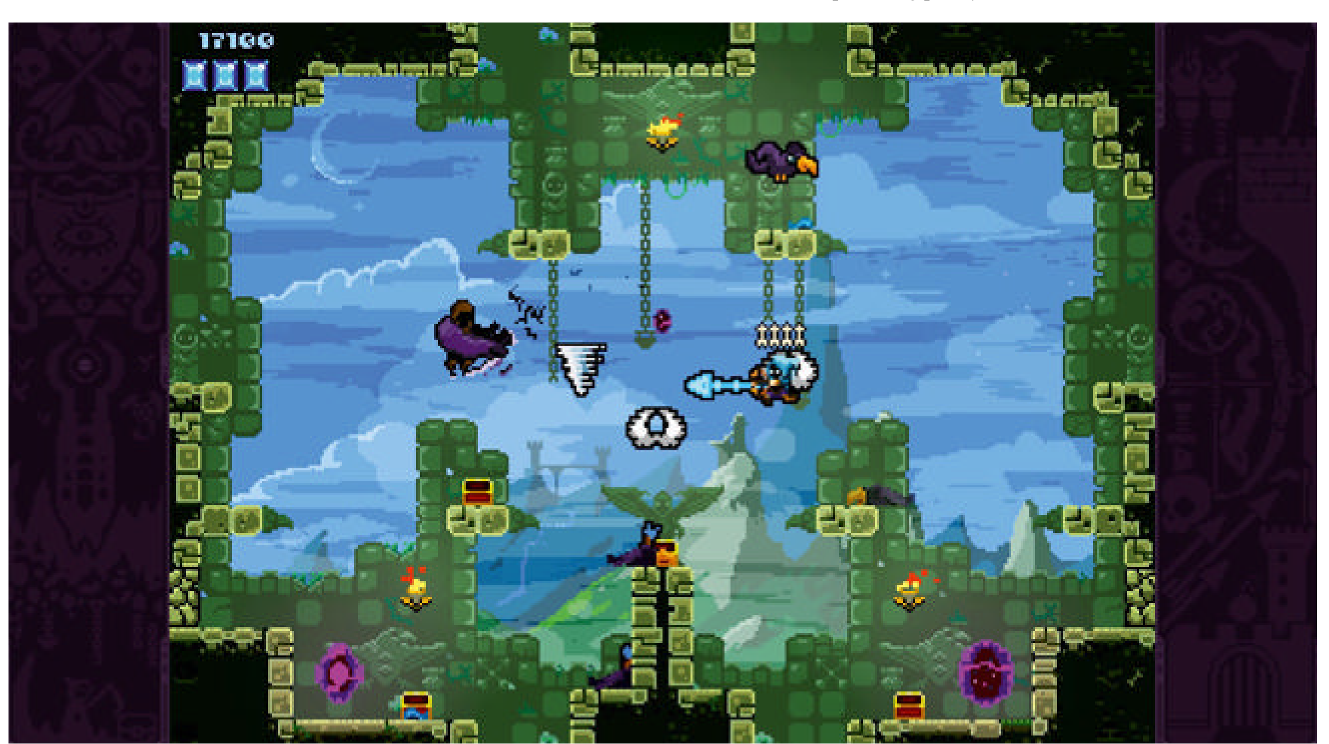
8

Publisher/developer Matt Makes Games, Inc
Format PC (version tested), PS4
Release Out now



QUIVER AND QUAKE
TowerFall's Variants menu enhances its longevity, allowing you to toggle a wide variety of optional features in multiplayer on or off. This could mean the permanent availability of power-ups such as bomb arrows and laser arrows; that the map will scroll continuously, wrapping around from left to right; or matches play out in bullet time. Certain options can be applied on a player-by-player basis, too, enabling you to create your own asymmetric multiplayer mode.

In co-op, each monster has its own behavioural patterns and set of vulnerabilities. These harpies, for example, are able to deflect your first arrow with a whirlwind, forcing you to use two in succession to beat them





Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Scoping out the military FPS that defined a generation

By Nathan Brown

Publisher Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward **Format** 360, PC, PS3, Wii **Release** 2007

The year is 2007, and World War II is over at last. Developers have finally run out of ways to retell the same old story and Infinity Ward has already got as close to replicating Saving Private Ryan's Omaha Beach scene as videogames feel likely to get. WWII ran for six long years and so has the FPS genre's obsession with it; what began with 1999's *Medal Of Honor* peaked in 2005 with *Call Of Duty 2*. It's time for change, and of course Infinity Ward – the *COD* creator formed from members of the team that made *Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault* – is the one to provide it. But it couldn't know that *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* would become the defining shooter of the PS3/360 generation, and arguably the most influential game of that period overall.

COD4's impact is plain beyond the sequels that followed and the scores of rival shooters seeking a cut of its success. It inspired movie directors to start pointing their cameras down red-dot sights and made customisable multiplayer loadouts and levelling unlocks standard in games of all stripes. But while it may be commonly thought of as an online game, *COD4*'s biggest trick was redefining the singleplayer campaign. Clocking in at six hours at a time when games were expected to run for two or three times the length, its story is a masterclass in variety and pacing. And this globe-trotting adventure, seen through the eyes of multiple protagonists, was liberating after more than half a decade of assaults on Nazi bunkers. While environments are reused – one mission might start in the same place as the preceding one, but at a different time of day – its ideas aren't. You follow the leader and shoot on command, sure, but Infinity Ward ensures that you're rarely doing the same thing for long.

Take the Blackout mission, for instance. At the outset, you stalk through the Russian countryside, dispatching enemy guards stationed at waterside huts. Next, you take up positions high above a raging battlefield and provide sniper support, unassailed, for no more than a minute. You're set upon by an enemy squad around the next corner, and are invited to whip out your rifle's underslung grenade launcher. Then you rappel down a cliff face, fight across open ground, and rescue an informant from a nearby house, cutting the power and clearing out the place with the help of night-vision goggles. There are no setpieces, no in-your-face explosions, no scripted chases: just you and a succession of toys, none of which is in your hands long enough for the novelty to wear off.

There are setpieces elsewhere, of course. Crew Expendable, a mission set on a freighter sinking in the Bering Strait, ends with a desperate sprint to the top deck. Steam billows from cracked pipes, water spills down the stairs, and the floor is tipped at a 30-degree angle. And when you finally return above deck and leap to the exfiltration chopper, you almost don't make it. Your hands scrabble on the ramp, but just before you lose your grip entirely, you're grabbed and hoisted into the craft by your commanding officer. Like much of the game, it's since entered into the ranks of cliché, but only because it was so effective that everyone started doing it.

Crew Expendable also firmly established what would become a de facto part of the modern *COD* campaign: having you spend your time snapping at the rigidly scripted heels of your AI squadmates. These walking, talking, headshotting objective markers do get out of your way from time to time, but you'll spend much of the game following in the footsteps of your brothers in arms. This now-hackneyed concept was put to best use in *COD4*'s campaign high point, a tense flashback set in Pripyat. All Ghillied Up has you crawling on your elbows through the tall grass, lying prone as a patrol of tanks and infantry rumbles by inches away. You creep from cover to cover, sniping guards in watchtowers, sneaking up on others for melee kills, and giving feral dogs a wide berth. And while it perfectly encapsulates the lack of player agency in *Call Of Duty*'s singleplayer outings, you're frequently given the option of letting a patrol pass by unhindered. Many have since tried to recapture this mission's magic, but none have come close to the feeling of crawling beneath a convoy of trucks, holding your breath in real life as if it's somehow going to help your onscreen cipher.

As clear as this game's influence has been, it's the ideas that haven't become widespread that are most surprising. The opening mission, FNG, is a high-water mark in tutorial design, its firing-range test and timed obstacle course fitting the fiction and being perhaps the only FPS tutorial to offer real replay value, with your final time shown next to Infinity Ward's internal record. That in turn would inform your recommended difficulty level for the campaign proper, putting your performance into often embarrassing context, goading you into climbing the ladder for one more go, then another, then another.

Meanwhile, Death From Above, which puts you in a gunner's seat in an AC-130 gunship, was perhaps the game's most controversial mission, yet there is restraint here: the opposition starts out in a town-centre church, and you're sent back to the start if you so much as scratch the stonework or catch civilians in the blast radius. It's gently subversive, too, the detached commentary from mission command portraying an American military that has grown too accustomed to killing at the touch of a button from a mile up in the sky. Beneath the clouds of smoke lie themes that would go largely unexplored in shooters until *Spec Ops: The Line*. And how many FPSes before or since have had the brass neck to end a level by killing off the protagonist (see 'Shock and oh') at the end of a mission?

THIS GLOBE-TROTTING ADVENTURE WAS LIBERATING AFTER MORE THAN HALF A DECADE OF ASSAULTS ON NAZI BUNKERS

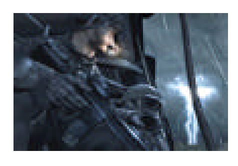
What is most remarkable about all this is that the campaign was such a small part of the package. If the influence of *Modern Warfare*'s singleplayer component can only truly be assessed at the end of its generation, the impact of its multiplayer mode was immediate and enormous. Yet of the scores of games that took its ideas, it remains the purest and arguably the best. Its unlock system is gracefully paced, its default classes ensuring new players don't suffer at the hands of the high-level hardcore. But there's something for every skill level here. Prestige mode, which enables you to reset your progress when you reach the level cap, means that players still have something to work towards after 200 hours.

And while subsequent *Call Of Duty* games have taken the concept to ludicrous extremes, *COD4*'s killstreak system is restrained and beautifully balanced, awarding you a UAV recon after three kills, an airstrike after five and a helicopter after seven. That's your lot. Avoiding being killed after the first is a matter of staying on the move, surviving the second means ensuring you and your teammates aren't clustered together, and the third requires staying indoors or shooting it down. Together they ensure that the battlefield is always changing, maintaining pace and providing a fizzing dopamine rush to the player that calls them in – the flurry of hit-marker effects as an airstrike rains down, the



Only very late in the game does Infinity Ward hint at the direction the *Call Of Duty* campaign was to take in subsequent games. This rigidly scripted, explosion-filled escape from enemy trucks and helicopters was a taste of things to come





TOP **The AC-130 also featured in *Modern Warfare 2*, but as one of the game's most powerful killstreak rewards, not as a campaign level.** ABOVE **Crew Expendable's freighter was repurposed for multiplayer. Wet Work's long, narrow space was a sniper's and shotgunner's paradise**

SHOCK AND OH

***Call Of Duty 4*'s missions bear names with a broad pop-cultural spread – War Pig references Black Sabbath, and Charlie Don't Surf borrows from Apocalypse Now. The most descriptive of the lot, however, is Shock And Awe. Things start out innocently enough. You shoot explosives at rooftops from a helicopter, then rescue the pilot of a downed chopper. After that's accomplished, you take off, waiting for the achievement popup. Then a nuclear bomb goes off. The sky turns orange, and the chopper starts to spin. Everything goes black. When you come to, the sky's dark with dust and smoke. Your vision blurs, the controller pulsing in time with your heartbeat. You crawl out and fall to the ground with a bump, your screen ever blurrier, your heartbeat slowing, the sky draining of colour. Eventually, you stop, look up, and the rumble stops. Rarely has an achievement been so depressing.**

succession of text popups as a gunship racks up the kills, the power chords that herald a level up. This is a case study in how to reward success, a mix of *Peggle*'s Ode To Joy and *Burnout 3*'s backslaps seen through the optical scope of an assault rifle.

You'd expect the multiplayer of a game that's almost seven years old to be a wasteland by now, and first glances are ominous. A welcome message invites players to a website to vote for maps to be included in *Modern Warfare 2*, and to follow the Twitter account of Robert Bowling, a former community manager who left Infinity Ward two years ago. Yet there are still a few thousand players online at any given time of day, lured back by Infinity Ward's tight map design and weapon balancing – two things that have been found increasingly lacking in subsequent *CODs*. The most instructive indicator of where the series was heading came in *Modern Warfare 2*, when ten points for a team deathmatch kill became 100. With each new iteration, the series has become louder, faster and dumber, to the point where *COD* is now a byword for the foul-mouthed worst of Xbox Live. Even that says much about its influence, since it stole that unwanted crown from the previous online FPS bête noire, *Halo 2*.

Call Of Duty 4 is unquestionably among the most important games of its generation, even if many would see its impact as more infection than influence. There are few shooters on the market today that couldn't feasibly borrow its subtitle, and any modern multiplayer FPS that ships without customisable loadouts, perks or level-up unlocks does so at its peril. And all because of what was surely one of the first entries on the design document: the new setting. No WWII game could support its range of locations, its spectacle, its arsenal or killstreaks. The Create A Class system wouldn't work either – you can't put a red-dot sight on an M1 Garand, after all. And its weaponset is more believable, its story's mix of fundamentalist Islam and Cold War paranoia more plausible than any sci-fi tale. *Modern Warfare* is fantasy anchored in reality, a powerful mix that beats history every time and retains its magic to this day, despite the craters left by the hordes that have followed in its footsteps. ■






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PRODUCERS
ARE YOU AN EMINENTLY ABLE ASSISTANT PRODUCER? IF SO, WE WANT YOU. WE ARE ALSO LOOKING FOR A QA LEAD.
BRILLIANT
ARTISTS
ARE YOU A COOL CONCEPTOR, 3D VISIONARY, OR AN ANIMATOR WITH A FLAIR FOR FLAILING FIGURES, YOU'LL FIT RIGHT IN!
AMAZING
PROGRAMMERS
WHETHER IT'S AN EYE FOR AI, OR A FLAIR FOR FX, WE'RE LOOKING FOR THE BEST.


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JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

The studio is buzzing. For some reason, everyone is crowding around someone's desk, looking and talking excitedly. Valuable man-hours are being lost because there's something worth seeing. But what could it be? Surely nothing as simple as a new female French animator? No, the correct company-wide approach is to ignore Claudette pointedly while mentioning to others how great you are at paintball. This is something on a screen.

Even the boss has come out of a 'meeting' to see what the fuss is about. As he joins the throng, it's clear why he's the boss: he has no idea what he's looking at. But he's assuming a judgmental frown, because, as the boss, it's his job to understand everything the team is creating and to be able to create it better and faster. If, of course, he wasn't busy being the boss and using work time to get his car riced up.

We must rise and shuffle over to see what this digital magnificence is. Not that it's important, but should we remain in our seat we would look like uninterested drones who don't get the core culture of game design and who don't delight in the creation of something truly groundbreaking in our midst. Peering over the sea of T-shirted shoulders, we finally see the pixelly holy grail. It looks like a group of Lego men bouncing around, playing football to a primary school level.

We dare not comment. The stubbly fellows clustered here are not mocking. Nor are they reminiscing about their primary school days, spent learning C++ at lunch and looking out of the window at their healthy, football-playing classmates. No. We hold our peace.

"Adjust the cohesion," says a coder. It's the first time he's spoken since he joined in 2009. He has a northern accent, which nobody suspected. The cohesion is adjusted.

Over the weeks and months to follow, we realise that what the screen showed was an entirely new and marginally more efficient way of programming flocking behaviour. And it doesn't matter that the game we all stopped working on for 20 minutes is a platform-based sidescroller. That wasted time is insignificant because everyone will be in at the weekend, pretending to crunch to get it finished on time. No, what we saw was the coming of age of the programmer who created the flocking routine. It's his first kill. It's proof he's pushing envelopes, boundaries and limits. Up until now, he's demonstrated the bare minimum of what every game developer must – the ability to type very fast, with quite a lot of rapid backspacing to correct his manifold typing errors.



"Adjust the cohesion," says a coder. It's the first time he's spoken since joining in 2009. The cohesion is adjusted

All this sounds condescending, but that is because I am. And if you're annoyed by this, well done for knowing what condescending means. However, it highlights something excellent. Britain is truly great at making games because it's held on to the Bletchley Park idea that if you assemble the talent, wonderful things will occur. In games-making, there's always a war on. Milestones loom, alpha dates close in like U-boat wolf packs, and the money is running out. But by letting people not do their jobs all the time, but do something better, we'll win through random cleverness and it'll all be over by Christmas. My history is shaky, but the Internet confirms that when Turing invented the Enigma machine, he knew it'd unlock the atomic secret that would end the Nazis' stranglehold with two small but marginally more efficient bombs. (Citation needed.) He was allowed to do so, despite using the tech solely to solve the Daily Telegraph crossword for years, because he was trusted to eventually get the job in hand done.

Having worked alongside very talented developers in America, I suggest that their drive and skill matches ours, but their focus is, well, focused. "Let's finish this game," they say, "and unerringly slick high fives, massive coffees and perhaps a single small glass of beer will be our reward." So they do it for the team, and as a team. But we do it the hard way. We hire the programmer who lives 25-hour days because he read once it's more 'natural', and spends half his life coding (and eating breakfast) in the small hours. Boeing may turn out ranks of milled-to-perfection airliners, but it took an English bloke in a shed with a chewed Helix protractor to create Concorde.

Money, though. That's the problem. Who can justify flocking boy's lone genius when the result's not going to be used this financial year? The economy has spoken in a whiny voice and wayward genius becomes a rapidly discarded luxury. We're all in it together, although Claudette has collected up her Dragonball Z figures and gone to a better job in Canada. My solution is bold yet simple: massive tax evasion perpetrated by all UK game studios. Let's make Britain's games great again.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration box-kite-curve.com

#267
May 8



